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VOL. 3168.

A FLASH OF SUMMER.

BY

MRS. W. K. CLIFFORD.

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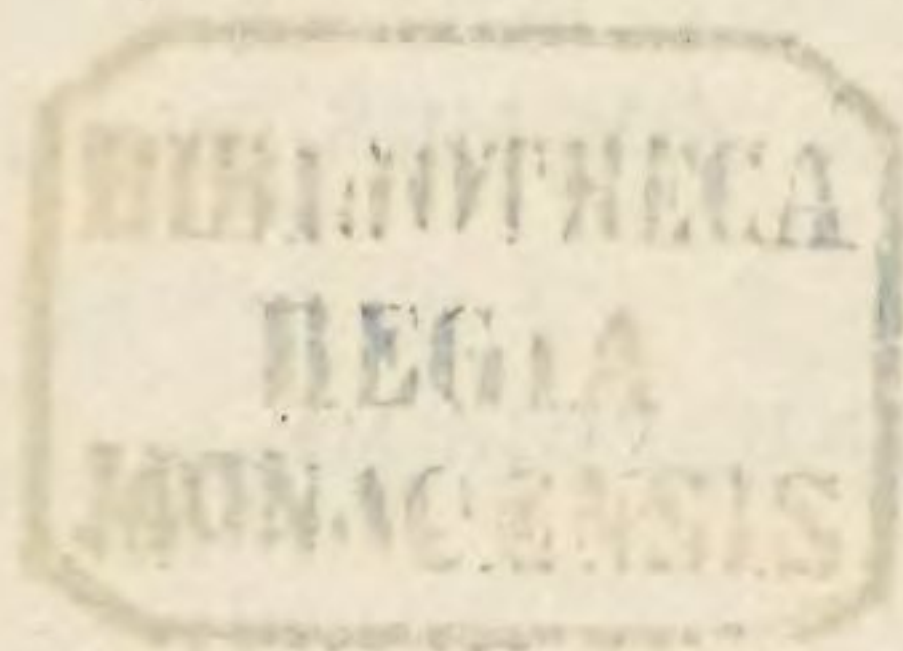
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A
FLASH OF SUMMER

THE STORY
OF A SIMPLE WOMAN'S LIFE

BY

MRS. W. K. CLIFFORD,

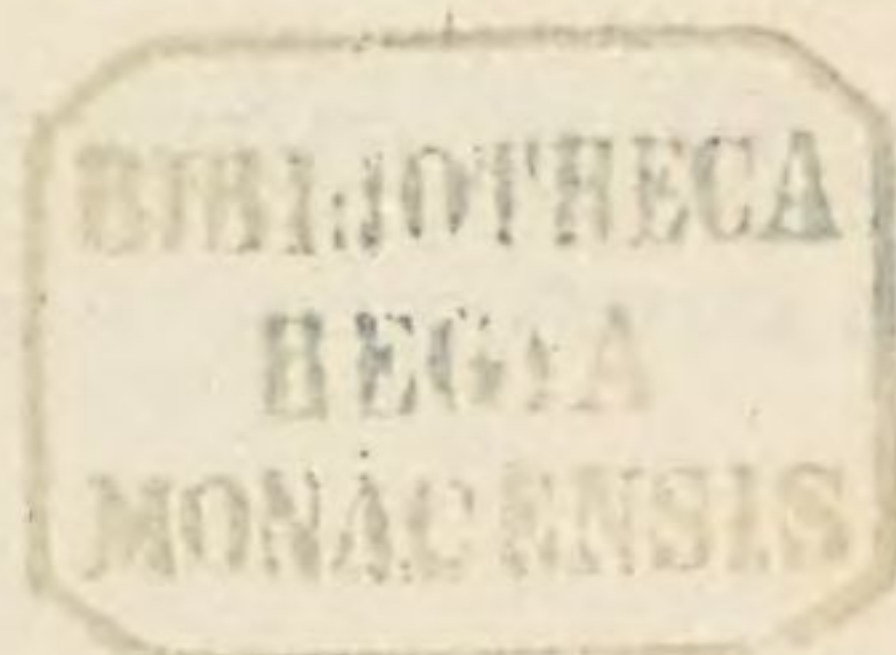
AUTHOR OF "MRS. KEITH'S CRIME," "AUNT ANNE," ETC.

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LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1896.



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PREFACE.

SINCE this story appeared in the *Illustrated London News* last year it has been re-written and enlarged. The plot, which I have not altered, occurred to me eight years ago, before marriage problems and questions had attained their present importance in fiction. I mention this to show that the story is a story, and nothing else, and does not in any way belong to recent controversial discussion.

L. C.

LONDON, *October* 1895.

A FLASH OF SUMMER.

CHAPTER I.

EVERYONE on Shooters' Hill had known Katherine Kerr by sight since she was six years old. She seemed to be always walking up or down the great Dover Road—that wonderful road that stretches from London, through New Cross and Lewisham, across Blackheath, over Shooters' Hill to Weiling and Bexley, and away to the coast far beyond. Every morning she left the White House, that was hidden among the trees, at the corner of the little road leading to Severndroog, walked down the garden pathway with the beeches overhead, opened the iron gate, and came out on to the high-road. Close to the gate was a well to which the inhabitants went with their pails in days of drought before the Water Company came to help them. Just below was the grey little church, and opposite was the post-office, established for many a long year at an unobtrusive general shop; next to the post-office was The Red Lion, with its wide quadrangle and tea-gardens that were almost rural. To the tea-gardens, on Sunday nights, the soldiers from Woolwich and the Government servants from the Royal Military Academy

brought their sweethearts, and sat drinking beer with them at little wooden tables in trellis-made summer-houses. They grew jovial as the evening went on. Katherine listened to their snatches of song and the din of voices till darkness fell, and perhaps faint in the distance the bugle-call was heard; then gradually the merriment ceased and two and two, always a he and she, the Sunday crowds went down the hill and turned to the right towards the barracks. The little road they took was known as The Lane, and led to Woolwich; at one corner of it was a stuffed-bird shop, and on one side of the shop window were toys and story-books for children. Katherine looked in at them now and then, and hesitated before she spent a stray penny on "Jack and the Beanstalk" or "Cinderella." At the opposite corner of The Lane were four houses called Ordnance Terrace. In the garden of the first house there was a peach tree trained up against the stable; she used to see the flushed fruit among the long narrow leaves in the late summer, and think how good it would be to touch it with her fingers. Lower down was a plantation, to which the artillerymen came in the morning to exercise their horses: the clatter of hoofs, the shrill bugle, and the rushing among the trees made her wonder if it were like a battlefield. Opposite, on the other side of the main road, was a wide expanse of gorse and blackberry bushes, the great trees of Severndroog and its ruined tower showing above them on the left. On the right, beyond the Scrubs, as the tangle of bushes was called, a narrow road that led to Eltham went across the landscape, and beyond again stretched the open country, showing the Crystal Palace in the distance.

In the morning, when she came out of the gate,—every morning of her life from six to seventeen, save on Sundays and during the brief holiday periods,—Katherine turned to her left and went down the hill, past the church on the one side and the inn on the other, past the stuffed-bird shop and The Lane that led to Woolwich, and Ordnance Terrace, and the plantation and the Scrubs. Then she came to where four roads met, or rather, two branched off, right and left, the one on the left to Eltham and the one on the right—a woman kept an apple-stall at the corner—to Woolwich; for the road behind her going upwards, and in front of her going downwards, was but the same great one. She used to stop for a moment, quite punctually, at a quarter-past nine, and look down the road that led to Woolwich, wondering if by chance the soldiers were coming with their band. If she saw and heard no sign of them, she would look to the left towards Eltham. At Eltham there was an old palace that had a moat, and on the edge of the moat a crane stood on one leg. When she went to Eltham, she always lingered on the bridge leading to the palace, to look at the moat and wonder what the crane thought about. She felt certain that it had lived for hundreds of years, and remembered Henry VIII. and Anne Boleyn dancing in the great hall that was now a ruin: she often wondered why the other dancers had not knelt to the king and entreated him not to cut off Anne's head.

But she never had time to stay long at the cross-roads; the fear of Uncle Robert was before her eyes, still more did she fear the tale-telling of Susan Barnes, who had looked after the house since Aunt Evelina's

death. She walked quickly when she remembered Susan Barnes, and, just as she came in sight of the milestone in the distance, entered a long low house on the right. The house had a narrow garden in front, and green Venetian blinds to its windows, that winter and summer were always open. This was Mrs. Barrett's school. Katherine went as a morning pupil, from half-past nine to one, and carried a mighty list of lessons back with her to learn in the drawing-room of the White House by Severndroog. She hardly knew her schoolfellows, for Mr. Morris (her uncle) did not wish her to make friends, and allowed no visitors. But the school-hours were happy enough, for Mrs. Barrett looked at Katherine in a somewhat kindlier fashion than she did at the rest of her pupils; and once—this was when she was twelve years old—she gave her a little black satin work-bag embroidered with forget-me-nots. Katherine kept it hidden away in a drawer, and thought it too precious a thing even to look at very often.

At one o'clock she sallied forth from her school, along the road again, never forgetting to turn her head when she came to the turnings to the right and left up the hill, and back to the White House. Susan Barnes was generally waiting with a sharp eye to see if she had dust or mud on her shoes, and with a quick injunction to get ready for dinner. After dinner—she ate it alone four days a week—she worked at her lessons till tea-time: then Uncle Robert came home.

"Well, what have you been doing?" he would ask. She would stand awkwardly, answering nothing, for she was always in awe of him. "Behaved yourself, eh?" On Susan's answer would depend the rest of the day.

"Oh, she's been tiresome as usual," the woman would say sometimes, "started five minutes late for school, and no one knows what she did coming back—it was five-and-twenty minutes past one by the clock before she entered the gate, and then, instead of having her gloves on, she carried them all of a screw."

"Oh, that was it! I suppose you were thinking of the soldiers or watching for the band: well, that's to make you do it again!" and he would give her a cuff on the ears. Then she hid herself away to cry, but did not hate him in the least, for she remembered that just as he scolded her now, so he used to scold Aunt Evelina. It was only a matter of course.

If Susan gave a good report, he would sometimes take her for a walk in the evening. They generally went up the hill; he and she and Martyr, the big black dog. The road, as it ascended, had been cut far back in the old coaching days, so as to make it less steep for the horses. On either side was the high footway, protected by a hand-rail, and behind it on the left she could see the top windows of old-fashioned houses standing a little way back behind fences and garden gates. On the right there were hedges and thick trees, bordering the grounds belonging to more important dwellings. Katherine used to think of the stage-coaches as she walked silently beside her uncle, and of the highwaymen and the legends of Robin Hood and Maid Marian. On the top of the hill there was an old inn called The Bull, and a little way from the door, against a tree under which the coaches used to draw up, some white stone steps remained by which the travellers had mounted to their places. When she had looked at the

inn, she turned her head quickly in order to catch sight of a narrow pathway opposite. It led through some woods, and round by the back of Severndroog tower, and over some fields to Eltham. There were many delights in the woods, for amid the bracken and briar the blackberries and wild raspberries trailed, and in the autumn the nuts hung thick and brown. Sometimes, if Uncle Robert were in a good humour, Katherine would push her hand into his—it was not till she was ten or twelve years old, that she ventured on this little coaxing—and say, “Let’s go through the wood.” Perhaps he would say curtly, in a manner that made her feel how absolute was his power—

“No; I want to go another way.” Then they trudged on towards Welling and over Shoulder-of-Mutton Green, and home by Plumstead Lane—a long walk for a little girl: but there were compensations, especially in September, when a flock of geese waddled over the Green, or in June, when they went down Plumstead Lane and past the strawberry-garden. Once or twice in the summer, after Mr. Belcher first came from town and went back again when he had had some tea and seen the view from the White House windows, Uncle Robert, in high good humour, took her into the strawberry-garden. Then she sat in a little summer-house and ate the reddest strawberries that ever ripened in the sun, watching the while some beehives in a far corner. She was afraid of the bees; but it was a wonderful thing to think of the inside of the hives, and of the honey stored in each little cell. In the middle of the garden was a scarecrow made of two sticks put crossways and a coat and an old hat, with a mask for

a face, and each armless sleeve had a strawberry pottle sewn to the end of it. It was worth being footsore and weary to go to the strawberry-garden, or even to pass it by, and to remember that she had seen the geese on the Green, and the scarecrow, which was visible enough from the road, and the still beehives, all in one evening.

Or perhaps Uncle Robert would give in about the woods. Then they had a lovely walk: adown the narrow pathway under the trees till they came to the stile,—a difficult, awkward stile that Katherine delighted in climbing,—through green fields, and over a cornfield, in which the poppies grew so thick she could have gathered an armful in two minutes but that she knew Uncle Robert would stride on without waiting for her, and through the churchyard, against which there were some cottages, as though the dead and the living dwelt in silent companionship. Thus they went to Eltham, and from Eltham, when they had seen the palace and the crane, they walked along the road Katherine passed on the way to school, and so up the hill again to the White House.

But these walks were only in the summer. In the winter-time her daily exercise was confined to going to and fro from Mrs. Barrett's, and sometimes in the afternoon to the post-office and back with Martyr the dog; or, but still less often, to Woolwich with Susan Barnes to shop. When they went to Woolwich, they did not go down between the stuffed-bird shop and Ordnance Terrace; there was a short cut higher up, a little steep way called Constitution Hill, that led into The Lane lower down than where it started from the main road. It came out opposite a public-house called The Eagle,

that also had tea-gardens belonging to it. A man with a fair beard was generally standing at the door. He was called Harding, and as she went by, he used to say, "Morning, miss. Is the master quite well?" She always answered, "Yes, thank you, Mr. Harding," and walked on demurely beside Susan Barnes, who never condescended even to look at him; for though Susan seldom went to church she had very strong opinions, and considered that Mr. Harding was a publican and a sinner. The walk to Woolwich was an event in her quiet life—under the trees on the common and through the white gate towards the Artillery barracks, with the wide field in front, and the Rotunda in the distance: sometimes the band was playing, or the soldiers being drilled on the parade as she and Susan went on towards the narrow streets of the town. If Susan's manner relaxed in the bustle of shopping, she would take Katherine into the confectioner's at Green's End, and say in her hard, respectful voice,—

"Better sit down and eat a cheesecake or two, Miss Katherine; it's a long way back."

Katherine used to wonder, as they went up the hill in the cold grey twilight of the winter, why so many people came to live in the world. They did not seem to be wanted any more than she herself was wanted, nor very happy, nor to have much to do. It was odd, too; that many of them seemed to be standing still, waiting for something to come by; and others looked as if they were going in search of it. She could not guess what it was they waited for, nor what might be the goal towards which they turned their faces. She only felt insensibly that there were mysteries and barriers

everywhere—in the sunset sky, and across the misty field, and far away in the blue distance beyond Shooters' Hill: most of all in the people for ever coming and going, passing and repassing, each one separate and alive and intent on something that was a closed and wonderful book to her. But one day, she felt, the doors would be opened wide, and the voices speak, and the mysteries be made plain: womanhood, that state she described to herself as “when I am grown up,” might hold the key to all the secrets.

Meanwhile, if life were occasionally a dull thing to her, and some days had their blows or bitternesses, there was the expectancy of youth in her heart, and the waiting for the unknown that made all actual things but as passing clouds.

The winter evenings were perhaps the most difficult to get through. She sat in the drawing-room alone, and was supposed to sew till eight o'clock; but she used to get up now and then to play at battledore and shuttlecock: for the drawing-room was not crowded with furniture like those of modern days, and there was a wide space between the round table and the grand piano. At eight o'clock she went downstairs to say good-night to Uncle Robert, and stayed in the dining-room to drink a glass of milk and eat three picnic biscuits before going to bed.

This was her life till she was nearly fourteen. Then one morning, just as Uncle Robert was getting ready to go to town, a letter came with many foreign stamps upon it: when he had read it, he turned to Katherine with a face so drawn and strange that she was frightened.

“Go and fetch Susan,” he said, and the two were

together for some time, and the dining-room door was shut. Katherine did not dare enter in upon them; besides, it was time to get ready for school. When she came downstairs five minutes later, she could hear that Susan was sobbing, and her heart warmed to the stern old woman who had taken care of her since she was a little girl. She opened the dining-room door a little way and said softly, "May I come in?" And Susan answered in a kinder voice than usual, "Yes, come in, miss; and you must not go to school to-day."

Katherine went up and put her arms round Susan and looked at Uncle Robert, who stood quite still and almost rigid by the table, on which the open letter was lying.

"Mr. Richard is dead," Susan said. "I knew him since he was a baby."

"When did he die?" Katherine whispered, awestruck.

"We don't know," Susan answered, wiping away her tears; "but you must have a black frock before you can be seen about again. You won't go to town, sir, to-day, I suppose?" she asked Mr. Morris.

"Yes, I shall go; I want to see Belcher." And slowly buttoning his coat, Mr. Morris went out and down the pathway with hesitating steps, as though he had been half-stunned, to the garden gate.

"Ah," said Susan, as she looked after him, shaking her head. "He's had a blow from which he'll find it hard to rise. He thought he knew the worst, but he was mistaken."

"Who was Mr. Richard?" Katherine asked.

"He was your Uncle Robert's only son."

"And where has he been?"

There was some hesitation in Susan's manner before she answered—

"He has been in Australia and other parts. He went away," she added, with still more hesitation, "before you were born. We knew we should never see him again, but we never thought to hear that he was dead: it was bad enough without that. Well, it killed his mother years ago."

"What killed her?"

"Mr. Richard—he did what was wrong and had to go away—they sent him away," she said in a low voice. "We knew he'd never come back, but we thought perhaps some day he'd be all right out there. He was no real relation of yours," Susan added, as if to reassure her; "you belong to the mistress's side of the family; so you needn't think there's bad in your blood—not that there was in his either. What he did he was led to do."

"Susan," Katherine asked, "have I any relations besides Uncle Robert? I didn't know there was Mr. Richard."

"Not a soul that I know of. You were the daughter of the mistress's sister,—half-sister she was, and years and years younger,—and there were no more of them, but just those two. Mistress married master, and your mother married a clergyman, who died and left her with nothing. It was lucky for you that your Aunt Evelina took you. But for her, you hadn't a relation in the world, nor stock nor stone belonging to you."

Then Katherine asked a question that had often puzzled her,

"Did Uncle Robert like Aunt Evelina?"

"Oh yes, he liked her well enough; but he was always a hard man, and had his way wherever he went, and sometimes she'd sit down and cry about it instead of getting up and doing what he wanted. If he'd been a bit softer with Mr. Richard, things wouldn't have been so hard for himself now."

"Are they hard for him?" she asked wonderingly.

"Yes, and they have been, and if they hadn't it would have been different for you. He wouldn't have cuffed you so often—I believe he's fond of you in his way; but men are always hard on women: they've got the upper hand, and they know it—and the only thing we can do is to make the best of it. After all, they earn the money, and they've the right to be master." Then Susan went to the window and pulled down the blind.

"What is that for?" Katherine asked, for she knew nothing of death.

"It's for Mr. Richard—I wouldn't like to think we didn't make the house dark a single day for him. It may be months since he died, but it's only this morning we heard of it, and we'll keep the blinds down till it seems like time for the funeral to be over. You are all your Uncle Robert's got left in the world now, Miss Katherine. There's Mr. Belcher; he thinks a lot of him, but of course he's no relation."

"Why does he think a lot of him?"

Katherine had always been a little afraid of Mr. Belcher, and kept out of sight when he was in the house. She wondered sometimes why he came at all.

"Old Mr. Belcher was the master's lawyer years and

years ago. He had been out in Australia; he was born there, or something, and when the trouble came with Mr. Richard, he wrote out about him, and did some good, I never heard what, but it was everything to your uncle and aunt. She saw him when she was dying—he died soon after himself.”

“And then?”— For Susan stopped, and seemed to be living over again to herself some scene that she remembered. Katherine waited breathlessly for a strange ending to the story of which she had not even heard the beginning; but Susan roused herself, and went on contemptuously—

“He was very different from this one, was the old gentleman, but he’s dead and gone long ago, and it’s this one that’s got the hold on master. He seems to lean on him and take his advice in everything. I know I would not trust him, but obstinate men, that think they know so much themselves, are just those that gets caught hold of—but it won’t do for me to be wasting all my morning like this!” Susan exclaimed, with a sudden change of tone and a sigh that seemed to be given to a past rather than to any present trouble. She turned away abruptly and went upstairs to pull down the bedroom blinds.

Katherine felt as if she had looked out a little farther into the world, and had drawn back disheartened, for she had only learned that Mr. Richard had gone wrong and died, and that Aunt Evelina had broken her heart. But Susan’s revelations made her see Uncle Robert in a different light altogether. She knew that any harshness he had shown had not been unkindness towards her so much as an expression of many things

he had suffered himself. She felt a little half-frightened tenderness towards him, and wondered if she could do anything that would please him.

Then she remembered there were some wall-flowers growing in the garden, at the far end behind the bank of laurel: she was certain he did not know they were there. She had stood over them every morning before he was down, and softly touched their petals; they felt like velvet, and she liked, too, the little close bunches of dark buds. Perhaps he would be pleased if she gathered some into one of the blue and white bowls, to put on the square table in the middle of his bedroom. Once or twice her pupils had taken Mrs. Barrett a bouquet of her favourite flowers; on her birthday one of them gave her a little brass vase filled with violets, and she had put it on the drawing-room table, and looked happy all day because of it. Perhaps Uncle Robert would be pleased too. So in the afternoon Katherine took down the bowl and went softly to the garden. She did not want Susan to see her. She wanted to give him a surprise in which no one else at all had had a share. She filled the bowl with water, from the pump that was just outside the house—so full that it brimmed over. Then she went along the pathway, under the beech and larch trees, and disappeared behind the laurel bank to gather the flowers. When they were arranged in the bowl, she rose, and was going back to the house. As she passed the back door—it was painted grey, and had a little heap of stones beside it—that led out on to the main road, a key turned in the lock. Mr. Morris and a tall dark man of about two-and-thirty entered the garden so quickly, that

Katherine started and dropped the bowl, which scattered itself with the water and flowers at her feet.

"What does this mean?" Mr. Morris asked. "What were you doing?"

She answered quickly, with a white face and two blue eyes full of fright—

"I was going to put some flowers in your room—because you were unhappy. I thought you would be pleased."

The tall man looked at her mockingly, and almost laughed. She saw it, and turned away helplessly, for Susan's talk that morning had made her feel that Mr. Belcher was a power against whom it was useless to struggle. He knew the family history, and Uncle Robert wanted him, and told him secrets, and listened to the things he said, and nothing would prevent his coming to the house. All she could do was to be silent. She let her hands drop to her sides and waited. Mr. Morris stared at her for a moment, as if he dimly recognised that she was old enough to suffer pain. But it did not soften him towards her. She was merely Evelina's niece, a girl who was half a stranger and yet claimed relationship. She lived in his house, and counted it her home, while Richard lay in his grave thousands of miles off.

"She is very sorry," Mr. Belcher said mockingly, as if anxious for the scene to go on. "You are very sorry, aren't you, Katherine?" But she made no sign, though she winced inwardly at his interference.

"Well, never mind," Mr. Morris said in a hard voice; "have that mess swept up: and don't pick flowers again without asking leave. I don't want to see you any more

to-day." He walked towards the house without another word, and Mr. Belcher followed him. She gathered up the flowers and bits of broken bowl into a heap, and, standing on the heap of stones, threw them over the garden fence into the ditch behind. Every morning for a week afterwards she used to see them on her way to school, till, unable to bear the sight any longer, she surreptitiously buried them.

Then she hid herself behind the laurels, and gave way to bitter disappointment, till, hiding her face in her arms on the little grassy bank, she broke down altogether, and sobbed. Presently she heard the sound of a footstep and started. Mr. Belcher was coming towards her with the amused expression still on his face.

"In disgrace, eh?" he asked, insultingly it seemed to Katherine. She rose to her feet and stood looking at him, while a strange dismay took possession of her. He was a tall man and dark, with brown eyes, cold and large, and his brown hair was carefully brushed and parted on one side. He was only two-and-thirty, but he looked much older, and as if he were a good deal taken up with the affairs of life: keen, and with an eye to main chances. There was something methodical in his manner and almost cruel in his expression: Katherine quailed a little before it, but did not know that she was afraid of him.

"I thought he would be pleased," she said sullenly.

"People are seldom pleased when you break their crockery," he answered with grim amusement. "You should be more careful." She did not speak a word.

He measured her with his eyes. "Why, you are growing quite tall, Katherine; how old are you—fifteen?"

"I am fourteen." He looked at her again.

"Come and walk round the garden." She hesitated and did not move. "Come," he repeated, with a hard little smile, "it will do you good."

Reluctantly she went forward, step by step, and walked beside him round the untidy garden, under the beech and larch trees, beside the marigold bed which did not yet show a sign of life, and towards the little clump of primroses that she only knew to be breaking into bloom. She would not even look towards it while she was with Mr. Belcher, it might betray them to him, and that would be so cruel: and luckily he did not see them.

"I should make something of this garden if the place were mine," he said, almost to himself.

"Uncle Robert likes it as it is," Katherine answered in a low voice, her soul full of opposition to everything Mr. Belcher said. They walked on again for a minute or two in silence, he still looking at her with the curious smile.

"Shall I ask your uncle to forgive you for breaking the bowl?"

"It doesn't matter," she answered, the tears coming into her eyes again.

"If I were you, I'd take care not to offend him; he has a good bit of money to leave behind and, if you play your cards well, it may come to you now." He said it with a meaning look and a nod of his head that for some unknown reason made her hate him.

CHAPTER II.

DURING the next two years, those that followed on the news of Richard Morris's death, Katherine felt herself to be under the dominion not only of her Uncle Robert but of Mr. Belcher. Mr. Morris appeared to care more for her, but he silently controlled every action of her life—so that she did not dare to spend a single hour in a manner of which he would have disapproved. The sense of his authority directed even the lonely walks in Eltham Woods which Susan Barnes sometimes allowed her to take on summer afternoons. She never dared to stay among the nut trees and blackberry bushes to day-dream, but walked on methodically and sedately, so that she might not fail to get into the time she was out the right amount of exercise. Her school lessons went on regularly, though Mrs. Barrett's pupils decreased in number, for the schoolmistress meant to retire in a year or two, and had lost her eagerness.

But an incident occurred that led to a happy acquaintance for Katherine. A sister-in-law, who had a genius for teaching drawing, went to stay for three months with Mrs. Barrett. Katherine, who was clever in a dreamy manner at many things, went some expeditions with Mrs. Ramsey in search of interesting places to sketch, and quickly developed a certain talent of her own. This was done in school-time, or on the afternoons

when, Mr. Morris being in town, Susan gave her leave to be absent from the White House for an hour or two longer than usual. There is, of course, a world inside the painter's colours only known to himself, just as there is in the poet's song or the musician's melody. The key of the door is in safe custody, none can turn it, or hear the hinges creak, and see far away into the strange countries, save those who journey across wide stretches never known to ordinary folk. But now and then it seemed as if the girl were at least upon the borderland, and she brought away from it haunting thoughts and little snatches of dreams that struggled in her heart a while, and then found birth through her fingers and out at her pencil-point, or down the tubes of colour.

"If you were properly trained, you would do something," Mrs. Ramsey said.

"Do you mean that I should paint a picture?" Katherine asked.

"You might," the drawing-mistress answered absently, not even thinking of her words. But Katherine felt as one at sea who hears the captain say that far off through the mist is some enchanted land that has hitherto only been a name to him. The ship goes on, he may never set foot on its shore or see it nearer, but he for ever remembers that once, dim in the distance, he passed it by.

Another pupil of Mrs. Ramsey's sometimes went out on the sketching expeditions. This was Alice Irvine, a bright and pretty girl of two-and-twenty, whose father was quartered at Woolwich. There was so little to do at Woolwich, and so much time to do it in, that she enjoyed an escape to the leafy haunts of Shooters' Hill.

She took a great fancy to Katherine, and made much of her, as a girl often will of one a good deal younger than herself.

"But you are like a princess in a fairy story," she exclaimed. "Do you mean to say, little Kathy, that your ogre won't even let you go back with me to tea one afternoon? I want my people to see you, dear."

"Susan says Uncle Robert would only be angry if I asked him."

"Do you never go anywhere?"

"Never anywhere."

"Will he let me go to you? Tell him I long to see the inside of his castle."

"I can't," Katherine said, with the fright that so often looked out of her eyes. "No one ever comes at all except Mr. Belcher."

"And who is Mr. Belcher—another ogre?"

"He is rather like one," and Katherine laughed—the merry little laugh of girlhood. It lighted up her face, and Alice saw that some day the girl would be beautiful. "But Uncle Robert is not an ogre, he is only—only unhappy, I think, for Aunt Evelina is dead, and a little while ago his son died too: he has no one else in the world."

"Except you?"

"Except me," she repeated half sadly.

"Why does Mr. Belcher come?"

"He knows all Uncle Robert's affairs, and wants to talk to him. He is a lawyer, and knows about so many things in which Uncle Robert is interested."

"I see,—family solicitor." Alice thought she understood the whole situation at a glance. "And when I go

away—my father expects to be sent to India soon—shall I lose sight of you altogether, Kathy, or will you be able to write to me?”

“I don’t think so,” Katherine answered slowly. “Uncle Robert and Susan would say it was all nonsense.” She knew, too, that she would have no money for postage stamps, but she did not like to say this to Alice.

“And you will go on living in the castle all your life, with the ogre to govern you, and only the one-legged crane for your friend, and the memory of Anne Boleyn to solace you, and the occasional visits of the family solicitor by way of dissipation?”

“I suppose so—I don’t know.” Katherine looked up with a wondering smile on her lips, for something told her that, for good or ill, this was not to be the whole of her fate, that there was some chapter of life she would live through far away from the peaceful surroundings of Shooters’ Hill. Her soul knew it, though her senses could not yet take account of it, and her heart had only one feeling about the future, and that the curious one of waiting.

This pleasant interval soon came to an end, for Mrs. Ramsey went to Italy to join a friend who kept a school near Genoa. Alice Irvine sailed for India with her father, and apparently forgot the princess and the ogre and the castle. So the solitary break in the monotony of Katherine’s girlhood ended.

A year went by. It seemed the stillest, dullest year she had lived, perhaps because unconsciously her heart was growing eager for more than had yet fallen to its share; or it might have been because the calm that

stays with us is most intense, while the distant storm gathers strength.

Mr. Belcher came regularly every Saturday. Katherine made out that he was solicitor to some Company of which her uncle was chief director, and they had evidently a great deal to talk about. He seemed to manage Mr. Morris's affairs more and more completely, and gained an ascendancy till he almost ruled the house.

On the day Katherine was seventeen, a strange thing happened. She had hitherto on her birthdays had a cake covered with white sugar. It was severely put on the tea-table by Susan Barnes, and though Katherine was allowed to cut it, she was not allowed to go to it at will—it had to serve the household for the next fortnight, and always to be eaten with an air of responsibility. But this yearly recognition of her childhood was almost the only pleasant one, and she looked forward to it. This time, when Susan Barnes asked a week before the day if she should make Miss Katherine's cake, Mr. Morris looked at her wonderingly.

"Cake?" he said severely; "why, no! She'll be seventeen. A young woman! What does a young woman want with cake?" Then, when Susan had left the room, he turned and looked at his niece as if he were considering some momentous question concerning her.

"You are very tall," he said at last; "you have your mother's blue eyes and dark hair. I suppose you're pretty," he added in surprise. "I don't know what I'm going to do with you; in another year or two you ought to be getting a husband."

Katherine thought over his words on her way to school. They opened a vista of life in a part of the world that was not Shooters' Hill and with someone who was not Uncle Robert: she dimly recognised it as the solution of her half-unconscious day-dreams, and then forgot it.

When her birthday came, it was on a Saturday: she wished it had been on some other day, then it would have been free from Mr. Belcher; but it could not be helped, and since there was to be no cake, perhaps nothing at all would be said about it. She hoped with a little sigh of disappointment that it would be so, for she dreaded everything that Mr. Belcher said, and still kept out of sight as much as possible when he was in the house. She went to school in the morning. Mrs. Barrett gave her a copy of *Lalla Rookh* in a dark binding with gilt edges and a narrow green ribbon-marker.

"We shall separate soon, my dear Katherine," she said tremulously; "but you have been my favourite pupil, and I shall always remember you. I shall retire in another year, but perhaps your uncle will consider that your education is finished even before that period, and wish to take you away."

"I hope not," Katherine answered. "I should be so sorry." She thought how dreary it would be to live morning after morning without passing the two roadways she had looked down all her life. Still she was growing older, she knew it, even while she stood looking at her schoolmistress and the familiar school desks; and she thought curiously of the world beyond the soldiers and band on the one side, and the moat and

immovable crane on the other. There were times when she felt so eager that she could have run along the great Dover Road, over the hill and past The Bull, through Welling and Bexley, on and on till she saw the white cliffs on the far-away coast. She was like a bird flapping its wings before it dared to fly, but that when it did would circle in the air higher and higher, till it beheld the grey sea and the mysterious clouds beyond.

Mr. Belcher had arrived when she returned, just as she had feared he would. She wished Uncle Robert had been alone, and that he and she had been going for one of the old long walks together in the afternoon. She felt that he would have been kind to her.

Mr. Belcher came forward to greet her as she entered her uncle's study.

"Seventeen, I understand, Katherine, an age considered to be grown-up for a young lady. I have brought you a present." He said it in a voice that sounded like a dominant note in her life, while he produced a brown leather case, such as she had never before seen except in the shop windows of Woolwich. Her hands trembled as she pressed the spring and disclosed a gold neck-chain, from which was suspended a little heart covered with turquoises.

"Is this for me?" she asked in astonishment. "Oh, thank you, Mr. Belcher! It is kind of you."

"Mind you take care of it," he answered, looking at a dimple in her cheek, patronising even in his generosity. "I don't think the snap is very strong."

"I have a present for you too, Katherine," Mr. Morris said, knitting his shaggy eyebrows together. "But I

waited till Belcher came before I gave it to you. Here it is, my dear." Something in his voice made Katherine's heart bound, while a lump rose in her throat. Then he too gave her a case, and in it was a little gold watch.

"Perhaps it may be useful to you," he added apologetically, as if he were half ashamed of giving her anything that was merely beautiful.

"Oh, it is lovely!" she sighed, full of joyful surprise. She borrowed an old guard of Susan's and put it round her neck, and tucked the watch into her waistband, and felt that the day was a happy one.

She wandered about the garden in the afternoon and peered over the fence towards the woods, wishing she could scurry away, round by Severndroog, over the fields and through the churchyard, to Eltham. Then she looked up and saw Mr. Belcher.

"We are to go for a walk," he said.

"Is Uncle Robert coming too?"

"No, we are going alone. Come, I saw your hat in the hall."

She followed him meekly into the house, not daring to refuse. He reached down her hat and the little tweed cloak that hung beneath it.

She put them on, pulled out some old gloves from a side pocket in the cloak, and stood with them "in a screw," as Susan would have said, waiting.

"Come," he repeated. She walked out beside him, down the pathway and through the gate, and on to the main road. He hesitated a moment. "We'll go over the hill," he said, and she gave a sigh of relief; for she had been afraid that he would go to the woods. They

walked on in silence for some minutes. Every now and then he looked at her half-doubtfully. When he spoke, it almost made her start.

"Well, what do you think of being seventeen?" he asked.

She thought of the new experiences the day had brought, and answered, with a little sigh, "I think it is very nice."

"What do you suppose will happen to you in the future?"

"I cannot tell," she said, looking forward at the long white road that stretched into the distance. Then, just as they were passing The Bull, he asked a surprising question—

"Do you think you would like to go and live in London?"

"I don't know," she answered doubtfully. "There are so many people, and there are no"—she was going to say woods, but she was afraid to remind him of them lest he should want to turn down the narrow pathway on the right—"there are no walks."

"You could drive in the park or go to the theatre. Perhaps some day, if you get a good husband—do you think you would like a husband, Katherine?"

"No," she answered shortly, for she resented the question. "I am not old enough yet."

"A regular bread-and-butter miss," he thought, and they went on for another few minutes without speaking. Then his pace slackened, he looked at the road ahead, and hesitated. "We won't go any farther this way, it is so dull," he said decisively, and faced round quickly. A few yards below The Bull, turning off on the right,

was a road overhung by trees. It looked still and deserted.

"Where does this lead?" he asked.

"It is Shrewsbury Lane; it leads to Plum Lane. But it is getting late, and"—

"Plenty of time," he answered; "come along," and helplessly Katherine followed.

But she lagged a little way behind, and consoled herself by examining her watch, thinking she was unobserved. She had not dreamed that Uncle Robert would give her a present at all, and that he should give her this was such a surprising thing. She had often longed for a watch, just as she often longed for other impossibilities. It was like a fairy gift. But what made her love it most, and feel that she would treasure it all her life, was the tone that had been in his voice when he gave it to her. Just as if he had eyes at the back of his head, Mr. Belcher turned so suddenly that it startled her: he laughed the triumphant little laugh that always repelled her.

"You'd better take care of that watch," he said; "he gave a good deal for it. I was with him when he bought it."

"I wasn't thinking of what it cost," she said; "I was thinking that it was very kind of him to give it me—it was very kind of you to give me the chain, Mr. Belcher."

"Do you like ornaments?" She considered a moment, for till to-day she had only possessed two little brooches and a locket of Aunt Evelina's.

"Yes, very much," she said—and they went on a little way in silence. Then she spoke again. "If we

lived in London, we should get a great many more books; but I should be afraid to go about alone, and there would be no places to sketch—I had some lessons at Mrs. Barrett's," she added hurriedly, "and the country is so lovely."

"You could walk about alone if you were married," he said, and looked at her meaningly; but she answered nothing.

They came to a narrow pathway that turned off on the left and wandered downwards through an undergrowth of brake and briar to Woolwich Common.

"This looks as if it were a quiet way," he said; "we'll try it."

"It's longer round. We should be late for Uncle Robert."

"Plenty of time," he said again decisively; and again she followed him. It was a lonely pathway, there was not a soul within sight or sound. She lingered behind, as she had done before; but he stopped and waited for her. "Take my arm," he said. She shrank back in visible dismay, but he held it out, and she did as he told her. "You will never be married if you behave like that," he said; "a wife always takes her husband's arm and walks beside him."

She did not answer a word, but a little fright crept into her heart and stayed there all that day and put a mark on the months that followed.

CHAPTER III.

TOWARDS the autumn Mrs. Barrett's health failed. She had to give up the school, and go to live with a sister in the country: so the windows of the house down the road were closed, and a padlock put on the gate.

This was at the beginning of the winter. Katherine was growing older and more impatient: life did not give her enough, it was monotonous and unsatisfying, and she was silent and alone. Her uncle was rather kinder to her, perhaps, but he held aloof as much as ever, and he never talked to her more than was necessary. She had sketched nearly every point in the neighbourhood, and read all the books in the house, carrying them usually to the steps of Severndroog Tower. She found it better to sit there in the sunshine, safely hidden from all things, save the crows and the trees, than to go to the woods with their bare twigs and soddened pathways and the frightened rabbits that scuttled through the underwood. Mr. Belcher's visits lost none of their regularity. His manner towards her was different. He seldom talked to her, but he looked at her a great deal, and there was something in his expression that made her fear him and invent excuses for hurrying out of sight on the Saturdays he spent at the White House.

At last a change came.

Susan Barnes fell ill and kept her bed for weeks while Katherine nursed her, and gained, at the same time, some knowledge of housekeeping. After a time Susan grew better, but she pleaded to be allowed to go and end her days with her own people at Bridgwater. Then, as if to complicate matters further, the owner of the White House refused to renew Mr. Morris's lease, and Katherine knew that he was discussing closely with Mr. Belcher the question of where to live if he had to seek another home. He was growing old, the news of his son's death had put twenty years on to him; the journeys to and from London tried him sorely; his silences were longer; and he no longer allowed Katherine to accompany him on his walks, but, stern and silent, turned away from her half-appealing look, and went on his way alone.

She tried hard to win him. One evening when he sat by the open window in the drawing-room, lost in thought, she entered unnoticed and stood hesitating. He looked bent and thin in the twilight. He seemed to be watching for some one to come out from among the green tangle that summer had made at the garden-end, and night seemed to be hiding more and more completely the one for whom he waited.

"Thousands of miles away," his thoughts ran, "and not a soul he knew to see him lowered into it."

"Perhaps he would like it if I played very gently," she thought, "something that he knew when he was young." She opened the piano—a jingling old piano with yellow keys, on which Aunt Evelina had played long years ago. Then, after much

searching in her mind, her trembling fingers began "Farewell, Manchester." The shadows crowded into the room, the darkness gathered closer; behind the notes strange voices seemed to sing—now a dirge and now a triumph. But there was no sign from the sitter by the window. Startled and afraid, she stopped abruptly. There was a long silence, then, with a great effort, she gathered courage, and, putting her hands down on the keys again, began a song she had learned from the old German governess, who had arrived twice a week at Mrs. Barrett's to give a lesson to the girls. Her voice was fresh and sweet, like the voice of a thrush in spring, and like a thrush's, it had never a sign of sorrow or remembrance in it: that was to come.

Susan stole up to listen and stood unseen outside the open door. "I wonder what put it into her head to do that," she thought. "I never heard her raise her voice when he was in the house before." The song ended, and the singer waited for a word of recognition. It came in a moment: Mr. Morris rose uneasily and walked away from the window.

"Keep your songs for when I am out," he said; "I don't care for music."

"He's a hard man," Susan muttered to herself as she went downstairs, "and no one could ever get round him—though Mr. Belcher seems near to doing it." Katherine, disheartened and repulsed, sought her a few minutes later, and drew her to the garden-door, and stood beside her looking out. The night was still, and full of mystery to the girl; full of darkness and threats of pain to the woman. "It's turned colder this last

half-hour; come in, Miss Katherine. It's time to bolt up, I never hold with keeping doors and windows open after dark." Then Katherine turned to her impulsively, and for a moment conquered the shyness that clung to her even with Susan.

"Susan," she asked desperately, "must you go away? I will do all your work for you, and take such care of you, if you will stay, you dear old Susan!" She put her arms round the woman's neck; but Susan did not respond very kindly. During the long years spent in his service she had learned something of her master's coldness and reserve.

"I am going to my own people, Miss Katherine," she said; "I don't want to spend all my days in service."

"But you have been all my days with me," the girl answered; "don't you like me?" She only said "like," and felt shy even of that.

"Oh yes, Miss Katherine; "I like you, especially since you've grown older; you were very tiresome about not taking care of your things when you were young. But I want to go to my home—one's own is one's own all the world over."

The endless procession of days went on, one after the other, each departing, so it seemed to Katherine, ill satisfied with its own dulness: and into the months there seemed to creep a little sense of disappointment and surprise, that was wholly apart from anything in her heart, as though they had sought and waited for events that were denied them. The one little pleasure in them came, oddly enough, through Mr. Belcher. It was in

the shape of a bull pup called Dottel. He brought it down with him for the first time one day late in October, a white and black pugnacious thing, with a queer ugly face, a brisk tail, and a loose, wrinkled skin that had a very little body inside it. It took to Katherine immediately, and consoled her for Martyr's absolute indifference; for the old black retriever cared for no one but its master, and for nothing but the door-mat, on which it lay from morning to night. She found herself watching once or twice for Mr. Belcher's coming, simply because it meant that she would see Dottel pattering beside him, slow and heavy, but ready to snarl and snap on the least provocation. She used to beguile him down the garden and through the back gate by which she had once broken the flower-bowl, on to the main road, and across to the post-office, where they sold chocolates, and back again, round the corner by the wall, and along the Severndroog road, and through a gate into a brambly untidy field, and disappear with him through the trees at the end till she came to the tower and the little open space around it. Then she would sit down with Dottel on the steps and talk to him, and pull up his skin in ruts upon his body, and tell him that he was hideous—"a dear dog, but very hideous."

This went on all through November and December, for what did the darkness and cold matter to her? She was young and well, and liked to feel the nip of frost upon her cheeks. Then suddenly it all came to an end. One afternoon in late January, when the twilight was gathering round the bare trees and the shadows huddled under them, Mr. Belcher appeared at Severn-

droog, just as he had appeared before her long ago behind the laurel bank.

"Oh, that's it, is it?" he said, with his odd smile. "I wondered where it was you hid yourself so often. It's growing late: come, I'll take you back." She held Dottel closer and tighter to her side, but he struggled till he got away to run joyfully round his master's feet.

"I don't want to go just yet," she said, dismay already taking possession of her. He gave Dottel a little kick in answer to his troublesome affection, and answered curtly—

"It's time; besides, I have something to say to you. It doesn't do for young women to be sitting about alone out of doors as late as this. Come."

She opened her lips to refuse again, but the habit of obedience was strong upon her, so she rose and stood before him as if waiting for the next command.

"Take my arm," he said; "it's nearly dark." They went back under the trees, over the brambly field, then, instead of opening the gate, he leaned on it, and turned and looked at her. He could see plainly in the dim light the startled expression in her eyes, the curve of her mouth, half proud, half pathetic, and the outline of the slim girlish figure that the wrap about her shoulders could not spoil. "She'll be a good-looking woman some day when she fills out," he thought. "I believe she is as tall as I am now. I wish she had more to say for herself; perhaps that will come, though, after a bit."

"Please let us go," she said coldly. He liked her voice; it was firmer than usual, and without any fear of him.

"Let me see," he said, taking no notice of her request. "How old are you?"

"Eighteen and a half. — Why did he ask that question now?" she thought uneasily.

"Time for the husband?"

"I don't want to talk about that," she said, and put her hand on the latch of the gate. He lifted it off, and, amused and triumphant, looked at her again. The fear and hatred of him lying dormant in her heart rose to her lips, but she kept them tightly shut.

"That is precisely what I mean to talk about," he answered. "You can't go on living here for ever. Do you think you would like to be married?"

"I never think about it, I am not old enough."

"Eighteen and a half is quite old enough. A man doesn't want to marry a frump." He put his face nearer to hers. "Give me a kiss," he said.

"Oh, don't!" she gave a cry that was half terror and half surprise. "Please let me go back." She stooped towards Dottel, who was at her feet, trying one uncomfortable attitude after another, almost as if she expected the dog to take her part.

"Nonsense!" he said, with another laugh, as if her resistance were part of a game. "Don't you think you'd like to marry me?" She looked up as if she thought he had gone mad.

"Marry you, Mr. Belcher? Oh no! Why, you are too old." It was said in sheer bewilderment, and without any offence in her voice.

"Thirty-six," he answered; "excellent difference—the man should be a good bit older."

Thirty-six seemed a long way on towards middle

age to Katherine; he had been a grown man, and had not seemed a young one to her, when she was a little girl. Moreover, Mr. Belcher, though he was moderately tall, was a little inclined to stoutness of figure, which added to his years, and his trim whiskers and manner of dressing did not take away from them. Katherine was silent for a moment. Then she pleaded—

“Do let me go home, Mr. Belcher. Uncle Robert will be expecting us.”

“He knows all about it. Highly approves, and said we’d better settle it up at once. Do you think you will like living in London?”

“Uncle Robert knows and approves?” she said unbelievably.

“Yes, of course he does. What do you suppose is to become of you if you don’t get married? You are grown up now, and must think of these things. What do you think is to become of you?”

She hesitated before she answered, and then there was something in her voice that almost touched him.

“But I am only a girl yet, Mr. Belcher—I only feel like a girl, and I don’t want to be married, and I thought if I ever—ever married, it would be—so different. I never thought that you would want to marry me. Why—why, you knew me when I was little; you were grown up then. I don’t want to make you angry, but if I marry anyone, I should like—like it to be—to be someone else.”

“And do you think the man will fall from the skies,” he asked cynically, though not altogether unkindly. “There’s no one else to marry you. As for not being old enough—lots of girls are married at your

age. Come, don't be foolish, we shall get on all right if you are a good girl, so you had better give me a kiss," and he bent his head as if to take it. With a cry she shrank back.

"Oh, don't, don't! I couldn't bear it," she exclaimed, and stood trembling with unconcealed horror.

"Oh, very well," he said, with a disagreeable laugh, "if you'd rather not. You will have to come to it, and you'll find it much more amusing to take me the right way than to take me the wrong one. Come, we'll go back; then you can ask your uncle. I should think you must know by this time that when he has made up his mind to a thing, he'll carry it through." He closed the gate after them as they went out by the Severndroog road. "Perhaps it's as well to tell you at once that it's my method also, so come along;" and with a jerk he pulled her hand through his arm. "I shall take you to the theatre, and give you some pleasure now and then, if you are a good girl," he added, as he drew her reluctantly along. It was not five minutes to the house. As they reached the garden, he turned and looked at her with an air of proprietorship; while Dottel, waddling on in front, stopped, as if he too had something to do with the matter.

"Where is Uncle Robert?" she asked scornfully.

"Waiting for you—he wants to give us his blessing. Why, Katherine, you'll be Mrs. Edward Belcher, and live in Montague Place, and look after the house and sit at the head of the table. Rather different from Shooters' Hill and going to school? You ought to be quite pleased."

She did not speak a word till they reached the

house. Then she faced him as if to make him ashamed.

"I want to see Uncle Robert alone," she said. And, leaving him in doubt whether to follow her or not, she entered the dining-room and shut the door. Mr. Morris was sitting over the fire.

"Uncle Robert," she asked, the excitement flashing from her eyes, and indignant incredulity making itself heard in her voice, "you don't want me to marry Mr. Belcher, do you?"

Mr. Morris looked up at her for a moment in silence.

"Yes, I do," he answered firmly. "He will make you a good husband, and I shall know that you are taken care of. He is well off, and"—

"Oh, but I can't, indeed!" she cried, clasping her hands. "It would be dreadful."

"You only think that because you are young, my dear," he answered kindly, but with determination that sounded like a decree, "and don't know what is best for you. Belcher will be very kind to you"—

"But why can't I stay with you? I don't want to go away."

"But I am going away. I must, for the lease of this house is up. I have been lonely since my son died," he added in a lower voice. "Probably I shall take rooms in London, near a club."

"Let me stay with you there," she pleaded, and put her hand on his. But he shook his head.

"I want to be alone," he answered, "and I am getting old, Katherine, and want to see you settled. I have done the best I can for you, and have told

Belcher what my intentions are, so that he'll have every reason to be good to you. Now go away, my dear, and don't be foolish."

"I can't be married to him, uncle. I don't like him. I never did, and"—

"You'll like him by and by, if he's good to you."

"Let me stay with Susan," she entreated.

"Nonsense! The thing is settled, we know what is best for you. Now go away," and he took up his newspaper again. Bursting with indignation, that she could hardly keep from her lips, she turned and left the room. She nearly fell over Martyr, who was lying on the door-mat: he whined and moved out of her way.

"I must put a brickbat round that poor old brute's neck and give him a wet bath," she heard her uncle say; "life is only a misery to him."

It was like a Fate-day, Katherine thought, as she went upstairs to Susan. She remembered a mystical story she had read the year before, in which lives to live were dealt out to the people and there was no escape for them: she felt already that there would be no escape for her.

Dottel was on the stairs; he got up uneasily as she passed, went up a step or two after her, then, as if he had changed his mind, stopped and waddled down again. His master stood by the garden-door, waiting in calm certainty till Katherine had given over her foolish struggles and recognised the inevitable.

"Susan," Katherine said, creeping through the shadows to the woman, who was lying on her bed, "are you better? Can I talk to you?"

"Yes, come and sit down side of me, here, Miss

Katherine. "I'm better." Susan raised her pillows and turned her head round till Katherine could see the clear unflinching eyes looking at her through the darkness.

"Susan," she exclaimed, as if she felt that her news would bewilder her listener, "they want me to marry Mr. Belcher; *me*—me, to marry"—

"Well, miss," and Susan raised her head a little higher. The girl sat down on the bed despairingly, for those two words betrayed that Susan too would be against her; so that, breaking down, she pleaded her own cause badly.

"But, Susan, he is so much older—and I am so young—and I don't want to be married, and I don't like him."

"If he makes you a good husband, you'll like him after a bit." Oh, those terrible words—"a good husband"! There was something hopeless in the sound of them.

"But I can't, Susan." She burst into tears and put her face down on the bedclothes that covered the woman's chest. "I don't want to be married. I don't want anything different, and I can't bear him," she sobbed. "Uncle Robert says I must, and Mr. Belcher"—

Susan raised herself still a little more and tried to hold her.

"Look here, Miss Katherine," she said, "your uncle knows what's best, and he's made up his mind, and you'll have to do it. Men's master, and we've give way to them. You'll find that out all through life, and you must just make the best of it. Besides, there isn't anything else for you to do; you haven't a rela-

tion in the world except your Uncle Robert, and no friends"—

"There's Mrs. Barrett and Alice Irvine"—but her voice failed her, for she remembered that the first had left the schoolhouse and gone away, and the other was in India, and neither had even written to her. She did not know where they were, or whether they were alive or dead.

"What good are they to you?" asked Susan; "they've each got their own to think of, not you, who are nothing to either of 'em. You see it's not as if you'd any chance of doing in the world for yourself"—

"Mrs. Ramsey said if I were trained I might paint a picture some day"—but it seemed so hopeless a remark, that her voice failed her again as if for shame of making it.

"Some day?" said Susan, scornfully; "but it's now you've got to do with, Miss Katherine. If Mr. Belcher gives you a good home and is kind to you, you'll see after a bit that it was all for the best, and you'll get on all right. Just don't make a fuss about it," she said kindly, drawing her arm tighter round the slim shoulders.

"But I hate Mr. Belcher," Katherine whispered, with a shudder.

"And I don't like him," Susan said, as if the words were dragged from her. "Never did. I expect he's a hard man; but," she went on doggedly, "men are hard—that's what women have to find out, and the wisest just says nothing and makes the best of them. You take my advice, Miss Katherine, and give in. You'll

feel better when you're settled down in a home of your own."

"I like this home."

"This isn't going to be one for any of us much longer. The lease is up, and the master's getting older. I believe he wants to make a change in his life; and me—I'm going home to Bridgwater, and they're going to put Martyr into the river before we go. It's all set out by fate"—Katherine raised her head and thought of the story-book again. As if she understood, Susan repeated, "It's all set out by fate, and you'll have to do it."

In six weeks' time, Katherine was married to Mr. Belcher.

CHAPTER IV.

KATHERINE did not enjoy her honeymoon; neither did Mr. Belcher. She was too simple and inexperienced to hold a man who was not even in love with her, nor did any idea of doing so enter her head. He on his side took no interest in her, had no desire to make her happy; to imagine himself in her place never for a moment occurred to him. Her shyness and fear of him were amusing for the first few days; before ten were over, he was bored, though he found a certain gratification in making her wince under those little gibes that he knew would sooner or later have a brutal development. They went to Windermere and stayed at the hotel near the station. The snow still clung high and white to the mountains, but the trees were sprinkled with early green, and the spring flowers were hiding among the tangle of the woods and hedges. The beauty of the scenery took Katherine by surprise.

"Oh, how lovely!" she cried joyfully, when it first burst upon her in the railway carriage between Oxenholm and Windermere.

Her manner pleased Mr. Belcher; he was almost tender as they stood an hour or two later by the lake's side, and waited for more remarks akin to that one in the train. But Katherine was not in the habit of talking much, and, moreover, had never been on an easy

footing with Mr. Belcher, nor, indeed, with anyone in her whole life, except, perhaps, her school friend Alice Irvine. She looked up at the great hills, and felt the beauty of the whole place wrap round her like a dream of which she was in the midst; but, like a dreamer, she had no words to say to the living man beside her. They took long walks almost in silence, while the thought of matters wholly unconnected with his surroundings, and she watched the world stretch itself out before her eyes, and realised how little she knew concerning it. Sometimes during that first week he used to look at her half contemptuously, as she sat back in the boat which the sturdy North-countrymen rowed across the lake or along the edge beneath the shadow of the mountains, and wonder how he was to get through the three more weeks of honeymoon with a schoolgirl in a serge frock and a straw hat. He had nothing to say to her, nor she to him. It bored him after a time even to worry her.

Then, luckily, they made acquaintance with a Mr. and Mrs. Oswell, who were staying at the hotel. He was a barrister of forty, dark and slim and leisurely, with kind grey eyes that gave Katherine a sense of safety when she looked at them. In some undefined manner it floated through her mind that if Mr. Belcher were cruel, Mr. Oswell would protect her. He seemed to be fond of his wife. Katherine used to see them walking up and down together in front of the hotel after dinner, evidently engrossed in each other's conversation. Sometimes she heard them laughing as if they were amused; or, if they were silent, there was something in the manner they walked side by side that

showed they were companions. "I can feel that they are married," Katherine thought. "They are very different from us." She could not imagine that a time would ever come when she and Mr. Belcher would walk up and down and talk in a low voice, and be content because they were together.

Mrs. Oswell was a tall, handsome woman, with a good many rings on her fingers, and clothes too smart for a country hotel. She was about two or three and thirty, and had a manner that was a little masterful, but it gave way pleasantly before her husband's quiet one. She took pains to be agreeable to Mr. Belcher, chiefly because her husband had taken a violent dislike to him—"which is thoroughly improvident of you, dear Fred," she remarked. "Mr. Belcher is a solicitor, and rich, I can see it in the cut of his frock-coat at the table-d'hôte, and you are the inevitable barrister. The rest need not be explained."

"I hate the look of him, and I am certain he bullies that unlucky girl he has married. I saw a horrible smile on his face yesterday when he had evidently made her miserable."

"Probably there's something to be said on both sides," Mrs. Oswell answered. "Perhaps he can be polite if it is expected of him; she is afraid of him, anyone can see that, and she expects him to behave as a tyrant, so he does."

The Oswells and the Belchers had a little square table to themselves that night. Mrs. Oswell, perhaps on purpose, informed Mr. Belcher, in the intimate manner that people who have been together three days on board ship or a week in the same hotel sometimes slip

into, how many presents her husband made her, and how terribly she bullied him, though she humoured him sometimes.

"Do you make your wife many presents, Mr. Belcher?" she asked. "You look like a generous man."

"I should make a wife like you a great many," he answered, with a smile that was meant to be fascinating.

"Perhaps she does not humour you enough. Mrs. Belcher," she went on, "always humour men; it never does to be too strict with them." Katherine, who felt instinctively that Mrs. Oswell was a good-natured but vulgar person, merely smiled across her soup.

"I don't think I shall find my wife too strict," Mr. Belcher said significantly.

"Beast!" thought Mr. Oswell. "I'll bet that girl runs away from him or breaks her heart before she is five years older." Then there followed a conversation that Katherine was to remember all her life, for every word seemed to burn itself upon her brain as though it were a portion of her history; yet the subject seemed a trivial one. "When you have been married as long as I have," Mr. Oswell said to Mr. Belcher, trying to make things easier for her, "you won't be so confident. Still, I manage to get my own way sometimes—eh, Bee? Do you remember when you had set your heart on going to Ventnor, and I had set mine on a sea voyage?"

"You behaved shamefully," she laughed. "He did, indeed, Mrs. Belcher. There are some horrid boats that go to the Mediterranean every Wednesday. Will you

believe that he beguiled me to Southampton under the impression that I was going to the Isle of Wight, and calmly took me on board one of them, and I sat quite still and innocent, to discover presently that we were on our way to Gibraltar!"

"Excellent experience for you, I should think," Mr. Belcher said, trying to be pleasantly sarcastic.

"You ought to take your wife that trip some day," Mr. Oswell went on; "they are capital boats, picturesque route, and not at all expensive."

"And they go to the Mediterranean?" asked Katherine. It sounded like the other side of the world.

"Yes, they go round by Gibraltar," Mr. Oswell explained, glad to talk to her. "There you get your first experience of the South. The scent of the orange trees almost choked me; and the pepper trees—long, drooping pink bloom they have—were wonderful."

"And such handsome men," Mrs. Oswell put in.

"Yes, go on," Katherine said, not even hearing her. "I would give anything to go abroad."

"Make your husband take you; don't give him any peace till he does," Mr. Oswell continued. "It's really an excellent thing to do," he added, turning again to Mr. Belcher. "From Gibraltar—you only stay there a few hours—you get on to Genoa"—

"To Genoa," Katherine repeated longingly.

"Skirting the shore—seeing Spain and Marseilles as you go by, olive woods and orange trees and palms—mountains in the background, vastly different from these hills. I envy you, Mrs. Belcher. It is a wonderful thing to have a first sight of Italy still before you. I like the little places best myself that are not overdone

with English people. You can find a few of them along the coast still."

"He ought to live in a tomb," Mrs. Oswell put in; "he delights in being buried. Naples and Genoa were all very well, and we picked up some pretty things at the shops; but I couldn't bear those dull little places where the people lived on macaroni and looked at the sea and the mountains all day, or went to mass in the morning, and spent their evenings round dim little lamps that didn't even attract the mosquitoes. I don't care for 'dear, dear abroad;' do you, Mr. Belcher?"

"I generally stick to England," he answered.

"Ah, I knew we were sympathetic," and she looked up at him with her handsome eyes. "We should get on splendidly, you and I. Now, I like Scarborough and Brighton. When there's not too much east wind, there is nothing much better than a good spin along the King's Road behind a pair of horses. What do you say, Mrs. Belcher?"

But Katherine was feeding Dottel, who had accompanied them on their honeymoon, and made no answer. Dottel was the only compensating element in her marriage. He was growing bigger but not gentler: the savageness that was fast developing itself gave a grim enjoyment to his master, who liked to see people shrink away and draw up their feet under them.

"Edward," she asked her husband timidly, as they stood by the door together for a few minutes while the Oswells took their nightly walk up and down, "do you like Mrs. Oswell?"

"Yes," he said with a smile as if he had been

gratified; "she is handsome and knows how to hold her own, just the sort of woman that a man admires."

"She is very good-natured," Katherine spoke gently, ashamed of not liking her better; "but I think she is rather vulgar."

"I don't think she is at all vulgar. I wish you were like her," he said, more good-humouredly than usual. "A woman who has plenty to say is better than one who always keeps her mouth shut, it makes bringing her out rather hard work."

"I am sorry"—her voice was pathetic and a little hopeless.

"Don't fret about it. I daresay you will improve after a few years of matrimony," he said impatiently. He did not want to torment her, for something in her expression almost touched him; but emotional people worried him—besides, he was dull and bored. He had nothing to say to her, nor she to him. "It's no good coming away with a girl who is always ready to cry or wince. There's nothing to be got out of it after the first week. I like a woman who shows fight, and gives as good as she gets, and laughs and amuses one," he thought.

Mr. Oswell came up the steps.

"Would you care for a game of billiards?" he asked, while his wife put out her hand towards Katherine.

"Come for a little stroll," she said, "and let our husbands pursue their wicked ways together."

Katherine descended the steps gratefully: she was so glad of respite from Mr. Belcher; besides, a *tête-à-tête* with one of her own sex was virtually a new ex-

perience. Mrs. Oswell took her arm. "It's an excellent thing to shunt one's men sometimes," she said. "Don't you think so?"

"I have not had much experience of shunting them yet," Katherine answered joyously, for even if Mrs. Oswell were vulgar, her manner was distinctly kindly. They walked up and down for a few moments in silence. Katherine felt as if her feet were treading the air, the relief of being away from Mr. Belcher even for a quarter of an hour was so great. She was able to drink in the beauty of the place, to look up at the mountains and round at her companion without fear of being scoffed at or reproved. "Oh, if I were but free, quite free in the world, able to do what I pleased and go where I would!" she thought; but that wonderful fate was an impossible one for her.

"How long have you been Madame?" Mrs. Oswell asked confidentially. "You look so young it might have been the day before yesterday."

"It is nearly a fortnight ago."

"Was he a widower?"

"Oh no! Why?"

"He looks it. I am glad he wasn't—can't torment you with the virtues of his dear departed.—Probably he'll find some other way," she thought.—"Why did you marry him? Were you very much in love?"

"I married him," Katharine answered reluctantly "because my Uncle Robert wished it, I think. I didn't want to be married so soon."

"There's too much difference in your ages, of course, but he'll be all right if you manage him properly. Don't let him bully you."

"Oh no," Katherine said, rather distantly, for she did not want to discuss her marriage with a stranger.

"And try to make life pleasant to him, my dear;" and she gave Katherine's arm a friendly little squeeze. "Sometimes women think there's no occasion to do that for their husbands, but they always expect their husbands to be considerate and agreeable to them—and very often they are not. I always feel so much for men," she added, looking with surprised admiration at the face beside her. "This girl is uncommonly good-looking," she thought; "when she's five-and-twenty she will be beautiful."

"Why for men?" Katherine asked. "They can do as they like—we can't," she added in a whisper, as if the mere desire were a crime.

"Because we know so little about them, for one reason. Now I feel convinced that you know very little of Mr. Belcher. A man of his age may have had all sorts of trouble?"

"Trouble?"

"Oh yes; you don't know how badly he was jilted when he was twenty-four—or that he didn't lose a heap of money later on—or that he hasn't been bothered to death by relations, or suffered horrible physical pain and said nothing about it. It never seems to occur to women how much history a man may have on the quiet. A woman's career is generally known to all her intimate friends, and handed on to her acquaintance; a man's, as a rule, is only known to himself—and perhaps to one woman who doesn't appear."

"I wonder if he has suffered things," Katherine

said, looking out towards the lake, and feeling, as she did so, that Mrs. Oswell was pushing open the gate of life a little wider.

"Disagreeable people generally have; and he does look disagreeable sometimes: it is rude of me to say it, of course, but it is difficult to be truthful and to preserve one's manners at the same time. I always feel as if they—the disagreeable people, I mean—were distributing round the knocks they have received themselves. But don't let him bully you: he's the sort of man who will if he can. Look very good-tempered, and laugh at him when he begins."

"You seem to be always laughing, Mrs. Oswell."

"It's such a safeguard against crying. You must let me come and see you when you're in town; I like you," she added suddenly. "I wonder what our husbands are doing—I hope Mr. Belcher will like Fred. Now, *that* man, Mrs. Belcher, is simply an angel; qualified, I am thankful to say, with a few of the weaknesses which apparently get worn out in this charming world, so that there are none left for a future one."

"Is it a charming world?" Katherine asked, looking up at her with curiosity.

"Delightful. The people in it are so nice, occasionally boring, but kind, good creatures most of them. Let that comfort you; it is the experience of someone a good deal older than yourself. There are exceptions, of course; but it is a wise thing not to believe it, or to think yourself the exception, and then you get along all right. You did not know I was such a moralist, did you?" she asked, drawing off her gauntlet glove

and playing with her rings. Katherine wondered who had given them all to her, whether she had bought them or if they had been presents from her husband or her friends. They brought home to her that Mrs. Oswell's life and experiences must have been so different from her own. She was beginning to feel as if the quiet folk she had seen all her life walking up and down Shooters' Hill belonged to a dream, of which she had been a part. Now she was awake, and had come into the world to live, though as yet she felt like a waif and a stranger. Some day, of course, she would have learned its ways and grown used to it.

"Are you a moralist?" she asked, looking up at her companion.

"I suppose so, when it is easy, or amusing, or convenient; I take things easily, and on the right side—when I can. I am giving you a first lesson in worldly wisdom, Mrs. Belcher."

"I think," said Katherine, after a moment's pause, "you must be very happy."

"Yes, I'm very happy," Mrs. Oswell answered quickly. "I'm a woman, and married to the man I like best. I am strong and healthy and well, and live in a delightful world, believing that the people in it mean well towards me and each other, and that if things go wrong it is merely an accident. And I have the knack of being amused."

"Yes; and you are not afraid of anything at all?" Katherine was afraid of betraying too much.

"No, dear, of nothing;" and Mrs. Oswell gave her companion's arm a sympathetic pinch. "My husband is an excellent companion, and has never been dis-

agreeable for a minute. Of course, I pretend he has; I wouldn't let him know that he possessed the ghost of a virtue for the world—he'd be ashamed of it and try to live it down."

"I'm glad you said that about the world," Katherine answered, not heeding the latter part of the speech. "It makes me feel happier."

"Happiness is generally merely the result of one's own way of looking at things," Mrs. Oswell said, while she thought to herself, "but if you find a way of looking at Mr. Belcher and getting any happiness out of it I shall be surprised."

"We must go in," she went on. "It is striking ten. I wish we were going to stay longer, then we might have had some more talks. I should like to teach you how to take life easily and enjoy it; you look a little sad now"—

"Oh no," Katherine said, feeling that it would be disloyal to her husband to confess it. "It is only that—that I never went away from home before, and everything is strange."

"May I come and see you in town?"

"Will you? Oh, do," Katherine exclaimed with sudden joyfulness; for Mrs. Oswell's request was like an assurance from fate that she would not be delivered up wholly to the mercy of Mr. Belcher. Lately it had seemed as if he owned her body and soul, and what the end might be she had not dared to wonder.

The Oswells went on to Ambleside the next morning. Mrs. Oswell appeared to be in high spirits as she took her place on the top of the coach and told her husband to tuck the rug in well across their knees.

She waved her hand to Katherine, and sent a laughing glance of farewell to Mr. Belcher.

"A nice woman—the sort of woman I like," Mr. Belcher said, as they turned away. "She has some life in her. I wish you would learn to be lively, Katherine."

She looked round with a smile that came and went quickly, like a flash of sunshine on still water.

"I'll try to be," she said, as they walked on. "You frighten me sometimes," she added timidly; "but I want to be happy, and to make you so if I can—at anyrate I want to please you," for it struck her that it would be rather hopeless to try and make so formidable a person as Mr. Belcher happy.

"I shall let you know if you don't please me," he said.

She looked at him and hesitated before she found courage to put the question that came to her lips.

"Why did you marry me?"

"I thought I might as well. There wasn't anyone else to do it, was there?" he asked mockingly.

"No." They walked along the road in silence for a minute or two. "I was thinking about the future all night," she said gently. "We are married, and have to be together all our lives; but I feel as if I were in your way. I don't think you like me much," she added in a frightened voice.

"Or that you like me much?"

"No," she answered, raising her eyes to his—he noticed how blue they were—and speaking reluctantly, "I don't. I only feel that I am bound to you and cannot get away. I am afraid of you now; but I want

to like you. I wish we could be like Mr. and Mrs. Oswald."

"Well, you see you are not Mrs. Oswald, and I'm not Mr. Oswald, and that makes a difference. I'm afraid I can't talk sentiment, Katherine; perhaps I shall when you are ten years older—or someone else will for me. Meanwhile, here we are at the hotel. You had better amuse yourself in the garden. I have some letters to write."

"I'll go and see Dottel," she said, with a choke in her voice.

"Nuisance a schoolgirl is!" he said to himself. "She hasn't any flick. If she'd told me to go and be damned, I should have liked her. As it is, she bores me to death. I wish we were going back to town tomorrow. I am tired of kicking my heels about here." The smoking-room was deserted. He shut the door and threw himself on the sofa with a sigh of relief. "A comfort to be alone," he thought. "I fear I wasn't cut out for matrimony, and that the girl was rather dear at the price. If I had been as wise as I am now, I wouldn't have done it; but it may be better in town." He leaned towards the table, picked up *Punch*, and turned the leaves over listlessly, then threw it down, and jumped up quickly. "Good God!" he exclaimed, aghast. "Why, I am saddled with her for the rest of my days. A little fool who won't be worth looking at for another five years, or listening to for another ten, and then I shall be ten times more tired of her than I am now. I wish she'd run away with someone. Perhaps she will," he added hopefully, as if he felt that the provocation would not be lacking.

Meanwhile, Katherine had unfastened Dottel, and was walking up a little pathway with him towards a wooded knoll behind the hotel. The buds were showing themselves on the brown trees, and there were little clumps of primroses and violets in the underwood. They reminded her of the primroses she had tried to prevent Mr. Belcher from seeing long ago in the garden at Shooters' Hill, feeling that it would be sacrilege for his eyes to rest upon them: they made her think, too, of Uncle Robert, who had gone by this time to the rooms he had taken in Gower Street, and of Susan Barnes away in Somersetshire with her own people, and of Martyr. Poor, stupid Martyr! He was lying deep in the muddy Thames half-way between the Old Swan Pier and North Woolwich. She thought of the day when for the last time he had dragged himself down the garden, and, with half-blind eyes and feebly wagging tail, followed his master and Mr. Belcher to Woolwich. They carried with them two bricks and some string, and had to keep looking back and calling to prevent Martyr from going home again. Mr. Belcher insisted on telling her, the next time he came, how they had taken a little boat and rowed out towards North Woolwich; then they had tied the bricks round Martyr's neck, put his head in a bag, and, midway across the river, lifted him over the side of the boat. He seemed to take a pleasure in her tears, and gave such a malicious laugh when he saw them, that it made her angry even now while she recalled it. She put her arms round a tree-trunk and drew up closer to it, and told herself with strange unbelief, as though she doubted if it could be true, that she was married to Mr. Belcher, and

would have to spend all the years of her life with him.

Then she looked at the blue lake beneath and the great hills beyond, and was comforted. The sunshine was sparkling on the water and lighting up the streaks of snow on the mountain-tops. "How beautiful it is!" she said to herself. "But the whole world seems to be beautiful," she thought, remembering Mr. Oswell's account of his travels, and her talk afterwards with Mrs. Oswell. "I should like to walk all over it—alone. Perhaps some day, when I am older, Edward will be different, and take me to Italy, only—I should like so much better to go alone."

CHAPTER V.

"THAT'S over," Mr. Belcher said, as they took their places in the train at Windermere. "Rather waste of time—don't you think so, Katherine?—going on a honeymoon, eh?"

"But people always go away when they are married," she said apologetically.

"Just as they do a great many other stupid things. Perhaps we shall find matrimony a little more lively when we get to town and don't see quite so much of each other. At present I think it is rather a mistake—don't you?"

She was silent for a moment. Then she gathered courage to speak, looking out at the mountains first and then up at him with the hunted, half-frightened look that he often saw on her face in after days.

"Sometimes I think that everything is a mistake," she said, speaking in a low voice. "Or else I don't understand—I don't understand what life means, why we are doing the things we do, or what we are making for; it is like a riddle with the answer covered up. Perhaps it is only because I want so much"—

"So much?" He looked at her with surprise. "What on earth do you want that you have not got?"

"I don't know—I cannot tell yet." She forgot altogether that she was talking to Mr. Belcher: the words

seemed to be forced from her. "I seem to be waiting for something. Don't you understand? Did you never feel like that even when you were young?"

"No. I am afraid I don't understand. At the same time, it is not quite a century since I was young, as you seem to imagine. Pray go on." For once she did not notice the sneer in his voice, and went on unafraid.

"I feel sometimes as if I were not even inside the world, but only on the edge of it, and not inside life, but only in a dream of it."

"Been reading novels?" he asked, still in the jeering voice, and she recognised it. He saw that she did, and went on triumphantly, as if pleased at having scored a point. "You are quite right, you don't know what you want. *I* think you are a very lucky young woman, Katherine."

She was silent, and looked out at the mountains again. All the lovely north country seemed to be flying past her into space, and she dreaded what would come after it. Then she thought of Mrs. Oswell's talk that night outside the hotel: perhaps she had been right, and Mr. Belcher was only dispensing in his turn the pain that had been meted out to him. If she were very gentle and good to him, perhaps in time he would be kinder. It was not his fault that she shrank from him, and felt afraid and did not like being married, and dreaded the years and years before her that would all be spent with him. Evidently it was just an ordinary woman's lot that had befallen her, and she was unnatural not to be content with it. It seemed to her, suddenly, as if she had been behaving badly, and ought

to make amends. She looked round and shyly put out her hand.

"I am very foolish," she said; "it is only because—because it is all so strange. But don't laugh at me, or be angry. I will do my very, very best; and let me tell you things, being married makes me feel that I belong to you. I do so want you to—to"—

"All in good time," he said, and, giving her finger a not unfriendly shake, took up his paper. He hoped she wasn't going to be sentimental. Probably she had been reading novels, there had been some lying about at the hotel; she was just at an age to be affected by them. He was a little puzzled, and wondered what the deuce he should do with her in London; he felt as if it would be such a bore always having her about—he and she in the big house in Montague Place, and nothing to say to each other: and the worst of it was that he could never turn her out. She would have to stay there all her life. He also looked forward to the years with apprehension. He stared at her for a moment round the side of his paper, and wondered what she was thinking about, and felt a pleasant contempt for her thoughts. After all, it rather amused him to see her there—to remember that that tall slip of a girl absolutely belonged to him for the rest of her life. He had a notion that she would get the worst of it: there was a vast consolation in being in the strong position, and that was his. He read his paper, and for the time forgot her.

She, meanwhile, softened towards him by the remembrance of Mrs. Oswell's talk; and, pacified by his almost kindly touch of her hand, felt happier on that

homeward journey than she had done since her marriage. It was only natural, she thought, that he should have found the honeymoon a little dull, thrown as he had been almost entirely on her society, for he knew so much about the world, and she, of course, knew nothing, and it had been so difficult to find things to say that would not make him impatient. But in London, perhaps, he would be different. There was, too, the fascination of the unknown and untried about the life to which she was journeying. She could not help the instincts of her sex, and once or twice she felt almost elated, for was she not a married woman, going to London, where she would be the mistress of a house, and sit at the head of a table, and order the dinner every day? She determined that everything should be very punctual and dainty. She wondered what the rooms were like; and she indulged in some visions of elementary decoration such as Mrs. Barrett had delighted in, and her uncle would have looked upon with stern disapproval.

The day was closing in when they arrived, and the house looked black and grim in the deepening twilight. Her heart beat quickly; she felt as if she were treading the future when she entered the doorway. Two servants were waiting in the hall, a sharp-faced old one who had been with Mr. Belcher's mother, and a young one who was evidently kept in subjection.

"Glad to see you, ma'am," the old one said. "I am Gibson; at your service, I'm sure; and this is Harriet," nudging the young one, "and if she has faults she'll do her best. Walk in, sir, glad to see you back. No, cabman," she cried in a shrill voice, "we

don't let any of them people come in carrying boxes. My nephew will do that, he's here on purpose." She darted forward, thin and quick as a gnat, while Katherine entered the dining-room and looked round it wonderingly.

A fire was blazing, and there was a lamp burning on the sideboard—a lamp that had no shade on it and brought out clearly the colour of the red flock paper on the walls. The table was laid for two, with great spaces of white cloth that made it look desolate; and in the centre was a large old-fashioned cruet-stand. On the mantelpiece was a marble clock, and behind it a looking-glass that reached nearly to the ceiling. The room was ugly, and had but few signs that it was lived in, yet it was fairly comfortable, and a certain sense of dignity hung about it. Katherine thought of the trees at Severndroog, and the scrubs, the gorse and blackberry bushes, and the garden of the White House. They had all gone out of her life for ever. Then she looked round the room in which she stood, and felt that it might come to feel like home if only the human beings who ruled her life would have it so. She caught the reflection of her own face in the glass; there was a smile upon it, for life is a wonderful thing with its fascinations and promises when the great silence that we call the future before us; and she was young and curious.

Mr. Belcher followed her into the room and went towards a heap of letters on the sideboard. He opened one and began to read it.

"Oh," she exclaimed joyfully, going quickly to his side, "perhaps there are some for me."

"This is for you, but I am reading it first," he answered; "it is from your uncle."

She looked at him in silence; surely there was some mistake. She took up the envelope—it was directed to her. She put her hand on the other letters and picked out a second one.

"Please let me open it," she said gently.

"You may open that," he nodded. "I wanted to see what your uncle said. A man has a right to open his wife's letters," he said, evidently amused at the dismay written on her face. "But she must not open his—you understand?"

"I should so like to open them myself," she pleaded. She had never received any letters in her life before, and had looked forward to them in the future as to pleasant events.

"I may so like opening them myself, and shall if it suits me," he laughed. "There! take your letter; I've done with it. The old fool has been writing to Australia; a brilliant idea has occurred him that Richard may have married and left some children. I hope he didn't; it would make a good deal of difference to us. Who's that from?" he asked, looking at the letter in her hand.

"From Susan."

"Susan? Oh, the old woman who couldn't manage to die even with the help of a three months' illness—I don't want to read her letters. What do you think of the house? It belonged to Taylor the stockbroker, but he couldn't afford it after the crash in American railways some years ago, so I got it pretty cheaply: rather a good stroke of business? You had better go upstairs

and take off your things," he said, with the quiet manner that directed her every movement. "I wrote and ordered dinner yesterday, so I suppose it is nearly ready. Harriet will show you the way," and he rang the bell.

Then Harriet appeared with a flat candlestick and conducted Katherine up the desolate stone staircase.

Mr. Belcher went back to his letters. "Morris is an old fool," he thought. "Of course, if they know that he is looking for them, half a dozen brats will turn up and call themselves Richard's. I ought to have insisted on a settlement; I may have saddled myself with this girl for nothing at all. If she isn't to have Morris's money, I might just as well have gone on amusing myself with Florence. There's some life in her and not too much sentiment. I'm tired of this girl following me about with her eyes that fill with tears every time I choose to pinch her hard enough." It was odd how much Katherine's slim figure and young face were beginning to annoy him. He liked a full-blooded, well-developed woman, with slow gait and rich, deep voice, who expected everything and took it as a matter of course. Mrs. Oswell had been somewhat of this type, hence her attraction for him. Besides, he had never thought women worth looking at till they were eight-and-twenty; by that time they had learned to know their way about and how to use their tongues. He hated soft words, and despised obedience even though he exacted it. A scornful laugh and open insults pleased him better. The only woman who had had any power over him as yet had treated him to these,

had trodden him under her big, smartly-shod feet, and held a whip of stinging words and threats over him. And unconsciously he liked these methods; they held him and provoked his admiration. But youth and innocence (which he thought stupidity) were in his way. He liked to hurt them and see them writhe and shrink from him. He had married Katherine with his eyes open, of course, but with a clear and definite reason. Besides, it had seemed a natural incident enough. It was time that he took a wife if he meant to take one at all, and in theory he had liked the idea of a young one: women were for flirtation, but girls were for marriage. Girls did not want equality and independence of thought and companionship, and all the modern nonsense that women were beginning to noisily struggle for nowadays. The nonsense was all very well to talk about with other men's wives, or a woman you had no intention of marrying, but a sensible man took care to exclude it rigorously from his daily experience. In his own home he should be master, and the first and only consideration, and thus Mr. Belcher meant that to be in Montague Place.

He made Katherine realise it even that first evening of all. Perhaps he felt uneasily that she had come to stay for ever, that day after day, meal after meal, she would be there, facing him at table, watching him go out, waiting for him to come in; and he would be powerless to deny her. He stared across at her during dinner, and felt as if somehow she had checkmated him. He was half amused and curious to see how it would turn out, but still more inclined to hate her, to make her wince and shudder. But she would do that

often enough during their life together; he felt already that to torment her would be some compensation for her everlasting presence, that and the making her feel at all times and in all ways that he was her absolute master.

He got up almost before the meal was finished.

"I shall go out," he said. "I want to have a talk with your uncle."

"May I go with you? I should like to see him in his new rooms."

"No; I want to see him alone to talk over some business matters," he added. "I daresay you are tired after the journey. You had better do your unpacking to-morrow, and go to bed at ten." He went out into the hall. "Good-night," he said, as he opened the street door.

"Good-night," she answered, and felt as if she were left in a prison that was her polite fate rather than in her own home.

Her husband walked quickly towards Gower Street. At one of the houses near University College Mr. Morris had taken rooms.

He was at home, the servant said. Mr. Belcher walked quickly upstairs to the first floor. The door of the drawing-room was opened by a tall woman of about eight-and-thirty. She was dressed in black, and round her neck there was a crucifix; she looked imperious, but her manner was that of one who had been executing an errand.

"Ah," she said, and her accent betrayed that she was a Frenchwoman of somewhat limited English, "you

want Monsieur Morris? *Le voici.*" Mr. Belcher looked at her keenly; he was seldom betrayed into surprise. She motioned him into the room, and, shutting the door, disappeared.

"Who was the good lady kindly qualifying your solitude?" he inquired. Mr. Morris was sitting by the fire in an arm-chair.

"She is a—a widowed sister-in-law of Mrs. Merrick, who keeps this house. She lives here."

"I have no doubt of it."

"How is Katherine?"

"She's all right. Do you like these rooms?"

"I don't think I shall stay in them long; I want to get into the country again."

"You'll be better there," Mr. Belcher answered; "and safer," he thought, for a Frenchwoman about the place was an unexpected turn in affairs.

"When did you come back? Is Katherine happy?"

"To-night. I suppose she is happy; she is safely provided for for the rest of her days, so she ought to be. I have been thinking," he went on after a pause, "it is hardly fair that I should have the entire expense of her. I always expected that you would make some definite settlement on her in your lifetime."

Mr. Morris looked up sharply, and was silent for a moment before he answered. "It's customary for a man to maintain his wife," he said. "However, when you pay me back that four thousand, I'll settle it on her at once."

"You see," continued Belcher, without noticing the

remark, "I married her chiefly because you wished it; I believe you thought it some compensation for the money I owed you?"

"It was your own idea; and as for my wishes, you married her because you thought it time that you had a wife, and because I told you that as Richard was dead, I should leave what I had to her. It is not so much as it would have been if things had turned out as you led me to expect."

"A promise is not very good security for a will."

"You'll get no other," Mr. Morris answered positively; "and if, as Madame Quiblier, the lady who left the room as you entered, suggested to me a day or two ago, Richard has left a wife or children, I shall make a fresh disposition of my property."

"That idea about Richard is all nonsense; of course, if you make known in Melbourne that you are seeking for grandchildren in order to endow them, why, every house in St. Kilda will produce some. However, if you like, I will advertise in the Australian papers."

Mr. Morris looked at him carefully again. "I think I can manage to do that myself, thank you."

"It might be amusing to go out there and see what it is like; perhaps if you wait a few months we could go together. I have some connections over there I should like to look up if I can make time."

"We'll see," Mr. Morris answered brusquely. "Go home to your wife, Belcher, that's the best place for you;" and he held out his hand.

Mr. Belcher felt himself dismissed as cavalierly as he in turn treated Katherine. "I shall have to keep a

good hold upon him," he thought, as he went back, "or, with the Frenchwoman on one side and Richard's foundlings on the other, he'll make a nice mess of it. He's as obstinate as the devil, but a woman might influence him. I wish I had left marriage alone."

CHAPTER VI.

MR. BELCHER suffered Katherine to live in his house, and was civil to her. He even recognised that she had a right to be there, but he took no trouble to make her life pleasant; and at the end of six months she knew him little better than she had done at the end of three weeks. He consulted her about nothing, told her nothing. She had virtually no share in the household matters; Gibson saw to these, and kept a sharp eye on everything—including Katherine, whom she did not view too favourably.

"I think I 'could do the housekeeping, Edward—I did it at home when Susan was ill," she said once in the early days; "will you let me try?"

"Gibson knows my ways," he answered.

"But I could learn them—every woman keeps house when she is married."

"We won't discuss it," he said shortly. The tax of her everlasting presence was enough, he thought, he would not have his life disarranged more than he could help. He fed her and gave her shelter; he supposed, when it became necessary, he would clothe her. He was civil to her, he amused himself with her talk, 'such as it was, now and then when he felt in the humour. More than this could hardly be expected of him.

Day after day went by with unvarying monotony.

Breakfast at eight. Katherine poured out the coffee while Mr. Belcher read his letters and the paper. When he had finished it, he looked up and made a few more or less civil remarks, generally with a view to planning out her time in his absence. At nine he went out; at a little before seven he came back, and always inquired what she had done during the day, not with the interest of a husband who cared, but with the air of a task-master who found some gratification in knowing that the hours had been long and difficult. After dinner he read his papers again or wrote letters. Once he tried to teach her the mysteries of double dummy, but, finding that she did not take a vivid interest in the game, he put the cards away with "I think we have had enough of that, thank you," and did not attempt it again. At ten o'clock he sent her to bed, and as she left the room, she generally saw him reach down a box of cigars from a shelf in the corner, as though he meant to indulge in a pleasant hour after she had gone. This was in the dining-room, in which they always sat, for the drawing-room was covered up with dusting sheets and hidden from the light of day. There was a little sitting-room on the stairs to which Katherine went if she felt that her presence was not required by Mr. Belcher in the dining-room.

One day, in a more kindly mood than usually beset him, he told her that it was the room in which his mother used to sit and do her sewing.

"Did she live here?" Katherine asked.

"She lived here after my father died. She hemmed all the dusting sheets in that room to put over the drawing-room furniture. I remember watching her."

"And has the drawing-room never been used since?" Katherine asked.

"Not since my mother's death. If I had a clever wife,—a wife who knew how to help me in my profession, and had plenty to say for herself,—it might be different."

"It is not my fault," she said, and for a moment there was a defiant flash in her eyes. "It is yours. You treat me as a schoolgirl, and while you do I shall never be anything else. I am not happy—not a bit happy; but I might be—perhaps you would be too—if you would only let me help you, if you would only treat me differently, and tell me things, and"—

"Indeed?" his voice was merely sarcastic and incredulous. The tears came into her eyes, and she turned away; she could not bear that he should see them. "When you are ten years older, perhaps, and have a little more go in you"—he stopped. The expression on her face puzzled him for a moment, then he divined that it was one of hatred—hatred she struggled with but could not help, and was surely there. He paid it back with interest. "I think you had better take the little sitting-room on the stairs for yourself, you can use it as much as you please," he added "I like being alone." So it came to be the one place of retreat in the house for her, the only room he never entered. She felt that he had some dislike of it. Perhaps he thought of his mother, who had sat there making shrouds for the useless furniture.

Mr. Morris came occasionally. His manner towards Katherine was a little gentler than formerly, but it was not more easy. He had nothing to say to her after the

first greetings; it was evident that he came merely to discuss business matters with her husband, and so, even before Mr. Belcher had looked across at her meaningly, she left them together. Sometimes two or three men came to dinner, and she sat silently at the other end of the table; for Mr. Belcher looked displeased if she talked, and told her once, in a sarcastic manner, after they had gone that her conversation was not of absorbing interest: so she took the hint and remained silent. A few people, wives of solicitors and anxious barristers, called upon her, and she returned their calls and there the acquaintance ended. Mrs. Oswell appeared several times, evidently out of kindness at first, and afterwards because she liked the lonely girl. Katherine learned many things from her; how to dress (though for that purpose Mr. Belcher gave her no money), and what to read, and a little of what was going on in the world. Thus in some dim fashion she began to understand life better, and gained as much wisdom, perhaps, as is given to unsophisticated girlhood.

"She ought to read the modern people," Mr. Oswell said; and his wife lent her Tennyson and Browning and Swinburne. They left her with the sense that had so often perplexed her since her marriage—a sense that life had cheated her; that she stood by the gate of the world, but Mr. Belcher held her back and would not let her go through and take her share of the chances beyond.

Now and then during the first months he was good-natured after his own fashion. He took her to a theatre two or three times, more to amuse himself with

her surprise at what she saw than to give her pleasure. Once he took her to Brighton from Saturday to Monday, but he met someone he knew, and left her neglected at the hotel. When he went again, she stayed at home, and was glad enough of the three days in silence and without him. During the first winter after her marriage he went away nearly every week. She never inquired what he did; she wondered sometimes, but she did not care enough to think about it. She knew he did not go for the sea—but what did it matter? She was never at ease with him, never for a single hour, for though her fear of him grew less as time went on, her dislike of him increased, until it woke up every nerve and sense in her to shrink from his touch, from the sound of his voice, the mere fact of his presence. The one comfort of her life was that he went out every day and all day. After a time he often went out in the evening too. She never knew where he went or what he did; he gave no hint of his doings, and she never dreamed of asking him for any account of them.

But gradually she created a life for herself; a life of books and thought, and long walks, and voyages of discovery into the far depths of London. She had found out—had not a single walk down an East End street shown it her?—that the world was full of suffering and hungry humanity. Her heart ached for it, and reached out and longed to help; but she had no money, and she was shy, and afraid to thrust herself upon even the meanest life unsolicited, lest it should be resented as an intrusion into one that had no concern with hers. So at last in sheer despair she held aloof, and confined

her wanderings to the better parts of town. Some of her simplicity vanished in those long months. She knew perfectly why Mr. Belcher had married her, and the half contempt, half impatience, with which he regarded her. Now and then she tried to soften him, to win his regard or admiration, but it was only done as a matter of duty or in recognition of the fact that she was his wife, and with almost a dread of her efforts having any success. Books had taught her the possibilities that the world holds for each man or woman who comes into it, and she looked on aghast at the trick that fate had played her. She guessed keenly enough what they were like, those happinesses and miseries that are but the complement of each other; and she realised still more keenly the bondage that was her own portion. In those lonely days, too, there stirred in her heart for the first time a definite longing for human sympathy and companionship, and a breathless knowledge, though she drove it from her as a forbidden one, that in human love lay the secret of human joy.

With all this, since she was but a mortal woman, there came a little undercurrent of pleasant vanity—for she was growing beautiful. Her eyes were more tender, and the sight of joy or sorrow that others carried, even though they were strangers to her, had altered the expression of her face. Moreover, walking had made her figure lissom and thrown back her shoulders, so that she looked tall and supple.

"I should like to know the end of your history," Mrs. Oswell thought, as Katherine entered one afternoon, a glow of health on her face, and the dimple in

her cheek showing itself more frequently than formerly. "It isn't Mr. Belcher, or I am much mistaken." Then she said aloud, "Well, you look as if you had found your own two feet and stood on them."

"I have done more," Katherine answered, "for I have walked about the world on them, and looked at the people."

"Yes?"

"And have come to the conclusion that everyone else is needed by someone. No one needs me—even Gibson thinks me in the way."

"Depend upon it, someone has need of you, and that is why you were born," Mrs. Oswell answered. "Perhaps the world itself has. There was a man who came to see Fred once, who argued that we were all little bits of a great mosaic."

"I would rather be an atom of dust in the desert whirled along by every wind that blows,—and thankful that there are four of them,—or a waif strayed by mistake into the wrong world."

"My dear, perhaps your husband has need of you." Mrs. Oswell said it from duty, and tried to say it positively.

"I wish he had; then I wouldn't mind how badly he treated me." For she had long ceased to disguise her life from Mrs. Oswell, who had seen clearly what manner of man Mr. Belcher was from the first, though with easy good-nature she had tried to defend him. "He has only need of Uncle Robert's money."

Mrs. Oswell put her hand on Katherine's. "Perhaps one day," she said gently, "you may have a little child,"

"I hope not." Her cheeks flushed and her eyes filled with tears. "I don't want to see more men in the world like Edward, or more women like myself."

"But your child would have a mother."

"Yes—how strange it must be!" she answered, clasping her hands across her breast as if they held a little one in them. "Oh, Mrs. Oswell," and her eyes filled with tears, "I often think of my own mother lying straight and still in her grave, and wonder what she was like, and if she was happy, and if she held me tight in her arms and rested her head down on me—so—as I saw a poor woman sitting on a doorstep in Theobald's Road rest her tired face against her baby's. But I don't want a child. I don't think I should love it, for I don't understand why mothers love their children so very much, unless they love their husbands still more."

"It would be your own," Mrs. Oswell said, staring at her,—“your own flesh and blood.”

"I don't love myself so much that I want to see more of me; and why should I love my husband's child,—more, at any rate, than if it were a stranger's,—when I don't love him? I should be sorry for the poor baby that had come into the world, and had to suffer pain, and was very little,—and that would be all. Surely a woman loves her children because they belong to the man she loves most of all? and she should never marry a man she does not love—she should die first. I know that now it is too late. No, a child would not make things better. It would only make them more terrible."

"Is there no one in the world you care for very much?"

"No, not a soul. Sometimes I long to be cared for by someone stronger and wiser than myself, whom I could love back, and think of, and suffer pain for, and serve. Perhaps that is why I have thought of my mother so much lately,—only I do not know what she was like, there was not even a portrait of her left; but whatever she was, I long for her."

"It is my opinion that you don't know what you long for,—a good thing too," Mrs. Oswell added to herself,—“and the red light,” she went on aloud, “is looming in the distance.”

"The red light?"

"It means danger." Mrs. Oswell counted the gold bangles on her wrist. "My dear, why don't you make your husband fall in love with you?"

"My husband?" Katherine exclaimed, with a shudder she could not hide. "I tried at first, and he used to look at me till I wanted to bury myself somewhere in the dark, and never to see anything again. I think he despised me for even thinking of liking him, and laughed at me, and scoffed at me. I seldom see him now except at breakfast-time: he's out all day, and generally all the evening too now."

"You know," said Mrs. Oswell, forgetting her tact in her eagerness to be clever, "I shouldn't be at all surprised if there's some woman he's fond of and goes to spend his evenings with. He was six-and-thirty, rather more, when he married you: a man doesn't get to that age for nothing, and he wasn't in love with you, dear, that was plain enough on your honeymoon."

"And plain enough every moment he has been with me since," Katherine answered bitterly. But there gathered a little fire at her heart, a little fierceness that increased her hatred of Mr. Belcher as she thought of the possibility of his having cared for someone else, it might be for years past, and of the manner in which he perhaps spent his evenings, while she sat alone in Montague Place. It put a sense of insult into her life that had not been there before.

"Mrs. Oswell," her voice was almost bitter, "it's a terrible thing to be a woman."

"Don't say that. It is an excellent thing to be a woman, if one has moderate luck, and follows one's natural instincts."

"Men are such tyrants."

"They are nothing of the sort," Mrs. Oswell answered; "a few exceptions may be: they will get weeded out as women become more intelligent. The worst of it is that intelligent women as a rule make themselves so difficult to love, and it is for love that men want women. Of course there are exceptions again," she added hurriedly. "But don't think badly of men, dear, because Mr. Belcher isn't a model husband, and don't become a strong-minded person, denouncing them and clamouring for rights of your own."

"I wouldn't for the world: besides, I always feel that as yet I don't understand life, there is a meaning to it hidden somewhere."

"You'll find it out some day," Mrs. Oswell answered. "And when you do," she thought, "I wonder whether it will be a comedy or a tragedy."

"I think I will go and consider it." Katherine got

up wearily, then turned to her friend with the smile that came and went in a moment. Mrs. Oswell used to find herself watching for it. "I have found a new pleasure in life," she said almost gaily. "It is walking about London, simply to look at the people as they pass me by. It is so strange to think that everyone of them lives a separate life and has a separate soul, and experiences, and secrets, and hopes, and ambitions, some of which I know, and others at which I only guess. I like to see two people together best, and to notice how they behave to each other. The most interesting are a man and a woman."

"You have arrived at that fatal knowledge, have you?"

"It must be the most beautiful fate in the world to be the woman and to love the man, if he is strong and handsome and clever, and—and loves you back again."

"How did you find that out?" Mrs. Oswell asked. The situation was growing dangerous, she thought.

"I didn't find it out," Katherine said, looking up at her in surprise and speaking almost in a low voice. "Every woman knows it in a vague way, from the moment she is born—it is one of her instincts. But for it, perhaps I should not hate Mr. Belcher so much."

"My dear," Mrs. Oswell answered, "I wish you would go home and fall in love with Mr. Belcher. A woman can love the strangest thing in mankind if only the whim takes her. For Heaven's sake, go home and get sentimental over Mr. Belcher! It's my sincere opinion that if you don't, you'll come to utter grief somehow and some day, when you find out that every woman alive is blessed or cursed with a heart."

"I don't think I have one, or only a little bit of one. My rôle is just to look on and do nothing, like the crane beside the moat at Eltham. Mrs. Oswell, you have been very kind to me—always. Good-bye, it is nearly four o'clock, and time to go home. Dottel will be back."

"With your husband?"

"No, he sends Dottel back by the office-boy."

"And goes off to spend his evenings elsewhere," thought Mrs. Oswell. "Depend upon it, he doesn't spend them alone, nor always with his own sex: a man's vanity prevents him from doing that."

Katherine was looking round the room: her keen sense of colour and proportion told her that its colours were incongruous, its nick-nacks too many, its effects crude and perhaps a little vulgar, but still it showed that the woman of the house had a voice in it, arranged her furniture as she pleased, and took a pleasure in her home.

"I wish I had a home," she said.

"My dear child, you have!" Mrs. Oswell was almost startled.

"No. Mr. Belcher has a home, and lets me stay in it, but I have no business there. I am in the way, and he makes me feel it. But I wish I had a room to decorate and make pretty, and a husband who would come home and admire it. You said that everyone in the world was needed by someone. Perhaps everyone in the world has a home somewhere, but a few go on and on and never find it, or die before they can reach it."

"Why don't you make the little room on the stairs pretty—the room that was his mother's?"

"I have no money. Uncle Robert gave me a present at Christmas, but I spent it on beggars and clothes."

"Doesn't Mr. Belcher give you any? What do you do for postage-stamps?"

"Gibson puts them down in the weekly books; but I don't use two a month," she laughed. "Good-bye again. I must go back to Mr. Belcher's house. I wish you hadn't said that about another woman: it makes me shrink from him a little more. I believe some morning I shall run away."

"And what will you do then?"

She looked back as she went out of the doorway. "Walk all over the world, seeking"—

"Seeking what?"

"I don't know yet—but I shall."

"She is like a woman in a dream," Mrs. Oswell said to her husband that night. "Poor little soul, I wish she would wake up."

"Perhaps she is better off in the dream."

"Perhaps. Oh, Fred dear, what a blessing you are! I feel as if I ought to say grace over you, thanking God for my good husband, as children sometimes thank Him for their good dinner."

"I don't think we have a bad time on the whole"—

"We have a splendid time," she answered; "but that is all you."

"I shouldn't be surprised if it was all you."

"Perhaps it is all both of us," she laughed.

CHAPTER VII.

KATHERINE had been married more than a year. The spring had come early and Easter was falling late: in a few days the short holidays would begin. The leaves had not spread themselves out yet, though the trees were covered with tender green, and the streets were full of flower-sellers. There was blue in the sky and the sun was shining, the air was soft and warm. People loitered to look at the shops or lingered in the park. The carriages drove along quickly as if they were taking a message; the people looked as though they had been told a secret that was pleasant.

"I know what it is," Katherine said to herself; "they feel as if the spring had touched their hearts, and they want to hurry away and make other people happy. I wish Edward"— But with the thought of him there came back the memory of his gibes and his mocking voice. "If I could only disappear out of his life," she thought. "But I am like a prisoner at the end of a chain that lets me go out a little way, just so far, and never any farther." She stopped, as she went along Oxford Street, at a flower-stall. There were bunches of daffodils with a few green blades in the centre—the bell-like single ones: and their tender firstness appealed to her.

"Sixpence a bunch, miss," the man said.

She had a shilling of her own, and walked back to Montague Place with her arms full of flowers. People looked at her as she passed. Her dark hair was coiled up into a knot, her eyes looked fearlessly ahead, as if into the future. She had the expression of a woman who is waiting, and knows that she has far to go before she reaches her goal. The expression on her face showed more content than formerly, for she had learned to feel that her own life was too unimportant to consider overmuch. Besides, she had found comfort in knowing that it belonged to the world far more than to Mr. Belcher. "For I shall live in the world all my days, whether I am with him or not, and be buried in it when I die," she thought. "I am glad I have learned to love it so much. I feel as if it were mine, my dear home, and Montague Place only an unfortunate little prison in it." She almost laughed at her own idea, and her face lighted up with the joy that spring had put into her.

"A handsome girl," a man said to his wife as they passed her.

"Beautiful," answered the woman.

Katherine heard them; a smile came to her lips and looked out of her eyes. "I wonder if it is true," she said to herself: "to be beautiful in a beautiful world sounds wonderful," and she went on her way. "I wish some giant would arrive," she thought, "and sweep all these houses into the sea, and we could devise some way of living without them, under trees or in tents. If we could wander away to the far ends of the world just as we liked, how much better it would be. Then Edward would not sit in an office all day and listen

to quarrels and grievances, and he would think some good of human nature, just as Mrs. Oswell does, and he wouldn't care for money—he would be altogether different. Perhaps his office is very ugly, and the people who go to him are mean and ugly, trying to get money may have made them so, and they reflect themselves in him. I wonder why it is that money so often seems to put wickedness into people. It is money that has spoilt Edward, I think. To gain money is the end that he has always in view. He married me for it—though he hates and despises me. Perhaps before he cared for money he was quite different”—she was turning the key in the door of Montague Place, and entered with her daffodils. “If he would only be different again!”

He was going to dine at home that evening: she arranged some daffodils for the table, wondering if they would please him. It was done from duty, rather than any hope of softening him, for, struggle as she would against it, her strongest feeling towards her husband was one of hatred and dread. She had arranged flowers before, and looked her best at dinner, and tried all the artifices that youth and prettiness know—only to find them useless. He had seen through them, had shown her that he did, but he had only laughed contemptuously and gone out.

When the flowers were done it was still only four o'clock, and an idea crossed her mind and took possession of her. “I'll go and see Uncle Robert,” she said. “It's just possible that I may find him in, it is a long time since I saw him.” As if she had been touched by a finger of fate, she turned and went out of the house. She had only been to see him once or twice before

since he had come to town; she never understood what it was that hurried her to him now.

The Frenchwoman opened the door, her face was radiant.

"Oh, this is good!" she cried; "I am glad that you have come. There is great news. Go upstairs, madame, and let monsieur your uncle tell you himself."

The sitting-room was in a state of chaos. Mr. Morris was packing some papers into a box; he looked at her with a moment's silent bewilderment before he spoke.

"Katherine"—his voice was eager and hurried—"I did not expect you. Why have you come? I have not told Belcher yet."

"What has happened, Uncle Robert?" she asked. "Are you going away?" He looked at her under his eyebrows while he answered in the old hard manner, but he seemed to maintain it with a struggle.

"I had a letter to-day by the Australian mail. Richard, my son, has left a wife and two boys. I go to Liverpool to-morrow, and sail for Melbourne on Wednesday."

"I am glad. Oh, dear Uncle Robert, I am very glad."

"Belcher won't be," he said shortly; "he'll be afraid that I shall not leave you any money."

"What does it matter? People seem to buy wickedness and misery with money. Perhaps these children will make you happy."

"But what will your husband say?" She stopped and considered; a shudder passed through her.

"I don't know," she answered, and quailed a little. He saw it, and was silent for a minute before he answered.

"I did not know he was so hard, Katherine, or I would not have let you marry him. I thought I was doing the best I could for you. A woman is better married, and there was no one else." It was the only apology he could bring himself to make, and he made it grudgingly.

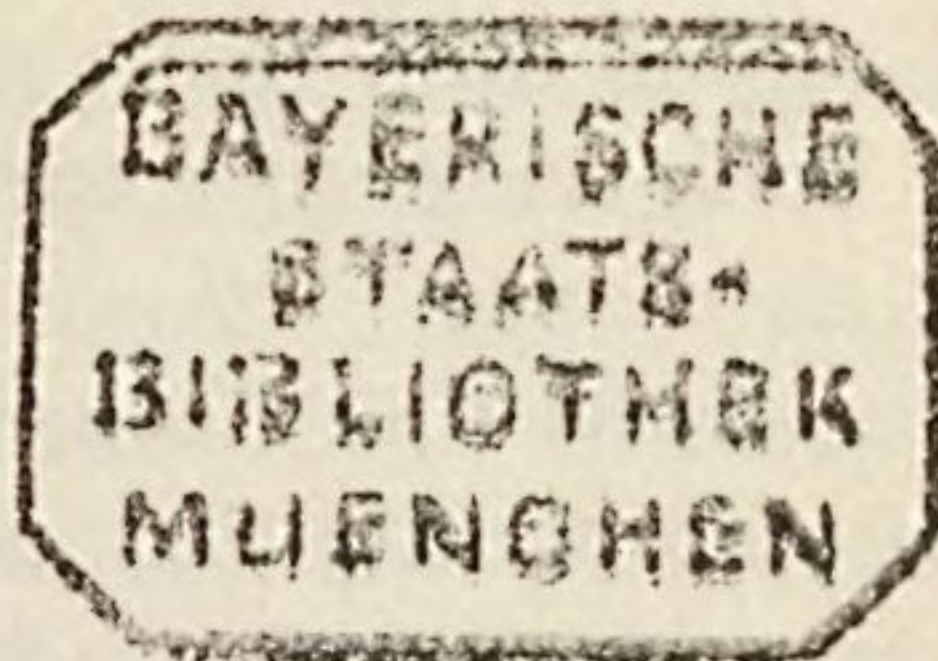
"Perhaps he doesn't mean"—she began, but she stopped, for she knew that Mr. Belcher's unkindness was every bit deliberate.

"I'm glad you have come," Mr. Morris went on, not heeding her, "for I wanted to give you this—I wrote it out, and have been wondering how to get it to you without his knowledge. It is a cheque for two hundred pounds. If I should not return, and he treats you badly, it will help you to do something, or bring you out to Australia. Perhaps you had better cash it to-morrow; it is not crossed; go to the bank, get notes, and keep them by you."

"Oh, Uncle Robert," she pleaded, gathering courage from this unexpected act of kindness, "could you not take me with you? He does not want me, indeed"—

"Nonsense! A woman's place is with her husband," he said, with his old curtness, and she knew there was no appeal. "I must have a talk with him; there is a great deal to say to him before I go: I'll come and dine with you to-night. You had better go back now. Tell him I shall be there by half-past seven—and, Katherine, get that cheque cashed to-morrow, but don't spend the money unless you're obliged. Stay! Can you take this telegram for me? I must tell them to keep a room for me to-morrow night at the hotel at Liverpool, or I may find myself stranded; I sail on Wednesday

morning. Now, good-bye." He looked at her for a moment, and the expression of his face softened. "You have grown into a handsome girl," he said; "the French-woman downstairs talks a good deal of nonsense about you, but I believe she's right." He put his hands upon her shoulders and kissed her forehead. That was his farewell, for, though he came to dinner that night, she did not see him alone again. She asked if she might see him off from Euston, but he refused, though he seemed pleased at the request.



CHAPTER VIII.

MR. BELCHER hardly spoke to Katherine during the last evening her uncle came to Montague Place. The next morning he seemed too much engrossed with his own thoughts even to be aware of her presence; but he looked back with an expression that frightened her as he left the house. It was the day Mr. Morris left London; she knew that he had some business with her husband in the middle of the day, and that was all.

The storm burst at dinner. He hardly spoke till the cloth was cleared and Harriet had left the room.

"Your uncle is probably in Liverpool by this time," he said, in his most sarcastic voice.

"I know," she answered, feeling that there was more to come.

"And has left me saddled with you for the rest of my days."

"I am sorry, but it is not my fault." She rose, and stood by the fireplace facing him.

"If you had been a clever woman, you would have managed him; but you haven't a spark of cleverness in you. The result is that he has made a totally inadequate provision for you, and if this woman and her brats get over him, he'll probably make it worse still. I suppose he calls that behaving like an honest man. What do you think of it, Katherine?"

"I am sorry for your disappointment," she answered coldly; "and I hope he will find his grandchildren. They will make him happier."

"We won't talk sentiment. I hate it—as I do you. I wonder if you know how tired I am of seeing you? I only married you because Morris wanted to get rid of you."

"He didn't!" she flashed. He looked at her for a moment in surprise, then tried to cow her with a more bullying manner.

"He wanted to get rid of you, and there was no other way of doing it. He was sick of you, as I am."

"It is not my fault," she said again. "You know that I did not want you, and you didn't like me. You only married me because you thought you would get money by it. Oh, I hate money! I hate nothing in the world so much. It is the ruin of men and women, the ruin of their happiness and of all that is best in them."

"You are becoming quite theatrical. It is rather a pity you didn't go on the stage. You would have made an excellent dummy at anyrate."

His mocking voice maddened her. She went a step towards him and spoke quickly, a tremble that would have been almost tragic to any other ears making itself heard in her voice.

"Why do you speak so? why do you say these things?" she asked passionately. "What is the good of making me miserable?"

"I don't particularly want to see you anything else, and I dislike you. You wander up and down the house with your soft footsteps like a cat. You are just like a cat."

"Why do you say these things?" she repeated. "Think how cruel it was to marry me and give me a life like this to live. It's true I don't care for you, I never pretended that I did, but I have tried to do so since I came here, and you have sneered and mocked and laughed at me. What have I done that you should treat me so? Is it that you like someone else?" she asked suddenly, remembering Mrs. Oswell's unwise remark.

"Yes, I like someone else," he answered triumphantly, "and always have. Somebody who has plenty to say, and is quick and merry, and doesn't bore me as you do."

"Why didn't you marry her?" she asked scornfully.

"She was married, and found a husband as great a clog as I find a wife,—a woman who isn't your wife is much more amusing, Katherine;" there was always something like the flick of a whip to her in the manner he said her name. "Marriage bores me. I thought perhaps you would be useful to me; but there is nothing in you but your odious self-consciousness, you are full of incapacity for anything else."

"Oh, I wish you had married the other woman! Didn't you know her before she was married?" she asked wildly.

"No, which is all the better, perhaps; but I know her now; and her husband—he died six months ago," he continued, with a smile of satisfaction. "So she is quite free to amuse herself. She amuses me. I always hated girls—"

"And I hate you," she answered, "more than any-

thing in the world. You married me for money, and I am glad you have not got it. I hope you will never get any, and I shall write and tell Uncle Robert so."

"You can write and tell him anything you please. He has gone to the devil, and I wish you would go after him. I saw Williams the doctor this afternoon, and he said the chances were against his returning alive; but he did his worst, so far as you are concerned, before he started to-day."

She turned to leave the room, for a lump had come into her throat, and she felt that in another moment she would break down altogether. "Please let me go," she said in a low voice, for he looked at her as if he had expected her to go on with the quarrel. To him it had the excitement of a battle, and was in some sense a compensation for his disappointment.

"Certainly," he said, and made way for her to pass. "This has been a nice little scene," he remarked.

"Oh," she said, and burst into tears, "will nothing set us free? I never wanted to marry you, and you have never cared for me; it is frightful to think that we are condemned to be together all our lives. Couldn't we part—or—or"—she hesitated, for it seemed such a hopeless thing to propose—"or could we not try to be a little happier—a little better towards each other?" She held out her hand as if in pacification. With uncontrollable rage he struck it away.

"Get out!" he said, opening the door. "I am sick and tired of the sight of you, and have no patience with tears." She looked at her hand unbelievably and at him, then walked slowly away. He heard her going

upstairs. He listened to her footsteps for a moment as if to make sure that she had gone. "I wonder why I hate her so much. Some men would like her—she is growing handsome. I believe I hate her because she doesn't fight me enough. I like a spice of the devil in a woman."

Katherine went into the little room she called her own. It was still gay with daffodils. She threw herself down on the sofa in a passion of despair. A corner as of something sharp made itself felt against her chest; she put up her hand to it, and remembered. It was the banknotes into which she had changed her uncle's cheque.

She came down early the following morning, for sleep was impossible. The bitterness and insult of last night had staggered her; she shivered as she entered the dining-room. There were two letters by her plate on the breakfast-table; the top one was addressed in Susan's handwriting, the other she did not know. She slipped them quickly into her pocket, for she knew that Mr. Belcher would jeer at them, even if he did not read them. She heard him coming, and put her hand to her throat for a moment to steady herself.

"Good morning," he said, in the mocking voice that always made her writhe; "slept well?" She looked back at him with a clear, unflinching expression that provoked some admiration from him against his will.

"Yes, I slept well," she said. "It was happiness to sleep, for I forgot everything." Her manner was distant, but so oddly courteous that for a moment he was puzzled. She stood looking at him, tall and scorn-

ful, yet polite, older by five years than when he had married her, though it was only fifteen months ago.

"In a temper?"

"No," she answered calmly. "Perhaps we had better have breakfast." She poured out his coffee and put it beside him, with his paper. There were some minutes of silence, then he seemed anxious to quarrel again.

"I think we arrived at a full understanding last night," he said. "If you had been a clever woman, you would have wheedled your uncle into making a settlement on you."

"I did not want it."

"But I did. There'll be next to nothing now when he dies—that is, if he gets out there safely and finds these brats. I should not wonder if he makes a new will, and leaves out even the little he has left you. He'll probably stay out there. He has resigned his directorship and everything else. Meanwhile, I'm saddled with you. I thought he was going to leave you £25,000, Katherine."

She went over to the fire and looked into it, and shivered again, with misery rather than with cold. "I am glad you are not going to get it."

"Glad, are you?" he exclaimed, starting up and staring at her face.

"Yes, glad!" she said. "You have made me miserable. I'm glad you are not going to get his money."

"You fool!" he exclaimed, and raised his hand and struck her, just as, when she was a child, and before he had grown more gentle, her Uncle Robert used to strike her. She turned and looked at him

with a face so white and terrible that he was frightened. She put out her hand to the bell; he seized it and pulled it away. "Go and sit down," he said, and almost pushed her back into her place. "Will you never understand that I was hoodwinked into marrying you,—a schoolgirl I don't care twopence about,—thinking you would have what you never will get now. I have not wanted to be unkind to you," he said half apologetically, "but it makes me so impatient to think that I am tied to a dummy, a fool, a log, a millstone; and marriage is so interminable." She got up again, and stood facing him, on the spot where he had struck her.

"I don't want it to go on. You made me marry you. I was a baby, and did not dare oppose you and Uncle Robert. But it is not marriage," she said, with sudden bitterness; "it's not like the Oswells' marriage, or the marriage of the men and women I see walking about. You have never been kind to me, and you have given me no sympathy or companionship since the day we started from Shooters' Hill together."

"I've given it elsewhere," he said exultingly.

"You have only insulted me and made me miserable," she went on calmly, not noticing his remark. "Why must we go on living together? I know you hate me, as I do you. My one desire is to go out of your sight for ever. Let me go!"

"You can go to the devil, if you like," he said; but again he thought, "I wonder why it is that I hate her so? she's growing handsome, there's no doubt about it, and I didn't think she had quite so much spirit in her. I wonder why I hate her so." For a moment he felt almost ashamed, then the uncontrollable feeling he had

towards her rushed back, and he recoiled as if from sheer dislike. "I always hated a quiet, white-faced woman," he thought, as if to justify himself. "I believe this one isn't such a fool as I took her to be either; there's something artful in her expression." Then as if to make sure that his own anger was not cooling, he repeated, "Did you hear, Katherine? You can go to the devil, if you like."

"Let me go and live with Susan in Somersetshire, or in one of the little cottages beyond the churchyard at Eltham." A vision of peace came before her while she spoke. She thought of the cornfield and the avenue of trees that led to the palace—for a moment she could see the crane standing on one leg beside the moat.

"And will you tell me who is to pay for the separate establishment?" he sneered. "It might be more amusing, of course; it would make you seem less like a wife, and a wife is such a nuisance. I could run down and dine with you sometimes. I never understood why people should be forced to live together all their days and every day, just because they're married. If you lived in the next street, we should not hate each other so much." And again he looked at her; almost wonderingly this time. "If she belonged to any other man, I believe I should like her," he thought. "It is the fact of not being able to get rid of her that makes me hate her."

"If you would let me go," she pleaded, not heeding his remark, "I could live on very little money."

"I don't choose you to go away. Your precious uncle would certainly do nothing for you then."

Gibson opened the door and looked in.

"Your portmanteau is ready, sir."

"Send for a hansom." Then he spoke to Katherine again. "I am going out of town for a few days. This is Wednesday—the day your precious uncle goes on board at Liverpool. I shall be away over Easter. If you hadn't been a fool, I might have taken you with me; as it is, I shall get pleasanter company. When I return, we'll continue our amiable relations. I'll put some money on the mantelpiece in case you want any while I'm away: you can keep an account of it." He opened the door. "Is the hansom there?" he called.

"Yes, sir."

"Good-bye," he said, turning back to Katherine; "perhaps, as we are going to be separated for a whole week, we'd better kiss each other."

"If you dare to come near me," she said, her eyes flashing with scorn and hatred, "I will kill you! You are not fit to live, and I will kill you. I hate you, and I would rather be bitten by a tiger or stung by a scorpion—anything in the world rather than let you touch me. Go away," she said imperiously. "It is like heaven to know that you are going." He stood and looked at her for a moment with amazement. Gibson came to the door.

"Your bag's on the top of the cab, sir," she said, "and Dottel is waiting."

He looked at Katherine again and laughed, but the laugh was an uneasy one.

"You really did that very well," he said, and went out of the house, followed by Gibson. "If she were always like that," he said to himself, as he drove off,

"she would be something like. She looks thoroughbred too. Florence is beginning to be rather tiresome, and I have heard all she has to say a good deal too often. I begin to think Katherine will turn out amusing after all. If she can fire up for one thing she can for another." He was almost sorry to go: if a reasonable excuse had offered itself, he would have turned back. "Wonder what she'd think of Paris or a turn at Monte Carlo," he thought as he sped along. "Think I must take her about a bit and watch her growing. She'll be the deuce in five years if she goes on like this—damn her! I wish old Morris had gone to the bottom the day before yesterday. A little too late, perhaps, if he does it to-day."

Gibson watched the cab out of sight, then came up the steps and closed the dining-room door as she passed. Katherine walked up and down, trying to get calm. "I can't bear it!" she cried to herself. "I can't go on bearing it! I would rather die than live like this. Uncle Robert sails to-day"—she stopped and considered. "But there would be no time to overtake him at Liverpool; he may have started already. I'll telegraph to him," and she went to the writing-table by the window; "but no, it would be useless. Oh!" and with a sense of insult that was not to be borne, she put her hands against the side of her face that he had struck. "I cannot—cannot live and see him again; I must go away somewhere. Uncle Robert gave me the money—he surely gave it me for this. I'll follow him out"—but as she said it a feeling of despair came over her, and she shook her head. "He wouldn't understand," she said; "he used—he used"—she hesitated,

for she could not bear to remember unkindness after so many years—"he used to strike me too, when I was little. He thinks about women as Edward does—that they should have no feeling but submission towards men, and take even blows with meekness." It was the old idea, she thought. But men were not like it in these days, or only the few, and they the second-rate men, who were afraid of being found out if they did not protect themselves with tyranny. The best men of any class were different. She knew that it was so. She had seen Mr. and Mrs. Oswell and all the people who walked together in the streets of London. Little Harriet downstairs was miserable for months after her father died, and her mother had nearly died, too, of a broken heart. No one would die of a broken heart for Mr. Belcher. "Oh, I can't bear it! I can't bear it!" she cried, and hid her face in her hands. "I will go away—right away—and never let him see me again. I will go to Susan and live with her." Then she remembered that there was a letter from Susan in her pocket, as well as another in a strange hand—the letters she had found on the table that morning. She opened Susan's first. It was merely to wish her a happy Easter, to say that she had not been well lately, and had a niece coming to stay with her. Katherine read it through from a sense of loyalty, but all the time she was curious about the other letter. To get one in an unknown handwriting was an event. She opened it at last with an eagerness that made a moment's break in that miserable morning.

It proved to be from a firm of solicitors in Chancery Lane, and enclosed a cheque for ninety pounds, a

legacy, less duty, bequeathed her by Mrs. Barrett, who had died three months before. She looked up with amazement, a little dulled by the excitement she had been going through. Ninety pounds, besides the two hundred her uncle had given her on Monday! To Katherine, wholly unused to deal with money and knowing but little of its value, it seemed to be a fortune. It was surely a chance of freedom sent from heaven? If only Mrs. Oswell had been in town, she would have gone to consult her; as it was, she sat still, with clasped hands, looking at the cheque. It was crossed and payable to order. "I will go to the bank and cash it, and then I'll go to Bridgwater to Susan and have one peaceful week with her before he comes back, and then—perhaps he will let me stay there. I cannot come back here—I can never live in this dreadful house again." The tears ran down her face. She felt so desolate. "Some people are loved so much," she thought, though she only knew it from books, "and others are just intruders in the world, and no one wants them. Poor Susan! She used to be kind to me, and if she is ill I can nurse her. Perhaps her niece will not know her ways so well as I do." She longed to be tender to someone, to be useful, to be necessary. If she had only been useful to her husband, it would have compensated her for many things; but no, she had merely been allowed to stay in his house, she had never been its mistress, nor of use in it. "And I cannot stay," she said; "I *must* go. I must—it is best for both of us. He wants to get rid of me, I am in his way." She repeated the words to herself again and again as she went slowly upstairs. Like a woman in a dream that

was half a nightmare, rather than one in the full possession of her senses, she gathered together most of her belongings. "I had better take them. I shall never come back here unless he makes me," she thought; "perhaps Susan will like them when I am dead." She pulled her trunk, the one she had taken to Windermere, out from the corner. The lock was broken; it did not matter; there was a little strap on either side that would be fastening enough. She began putting in one thing after another till it was full, hardly knowing what she did, only eager to get away from the house and away from Mr. Belcher for ever and ever. She took Uncle Robert's money out of the little desk in which she had hidden it last night, and put it in her bosom, and then she looked at the cheque for Mrs. Barrett's legacy. "I wonder if she knows about me now," she said to herself; "or if the dead know nothing, but lie in their graves sleeping on for ever." She put on her hat and stared at her own face in the glass. It was pale and drawn. Then she wandered aimlessly round the room, as if trying to remember something. "No, no; that is all." She hesitated a moment before she gathered courage to ring the bell.

"Harriet," she said, and the sound of her own voice was so strange to her, that she listened to it with interest, "send for a cab and have this box put on it. I am going to Bridgwater."

"Yes, ma'am," and Harriet fled with astonishment. A moment later Gibson came up quickly.

"Does the master know you are going, ma'am?" she asked sharply; "and when will you be back?" Katherine stared at her blankly. Then she remem-

bered that, whatever might have been Susan's authority over her in former days, this woman had none.

"That does not concern you, Gibson," she answered quietly. "Mr. Belcher will be here on Wednesday; you had better be ready for him." The box was put on the cab, and she drove away. The two servants looked at each other.

"He's kept too tight a hand," Gibson said to herself, "just as his father did before him. It's my belief she's gone away to cry her life out with that old woman at Bridgwater."

"If I was in her place," thought Harriet, "I wouldn't come back till I couldn't help myself. He doesn't care a bit about her. Lor! she should have seen father and mother, and what they was to each other."

CHAPTER IX.

KATHERINE held her breath as she drove away. She felt like a prisoner escaping, and prayed that she might never enter the house again: to live in it meant misery and degradation. A change must be made; something must happen. She would go to Susan, go anywhere—what did it matter where?—for the rest of her days. She was cowed and insulted, miserable and desperate.

“But I will never go back,” she said to herself. “Uncle Robert’s money and Mrs. Barrett’s legacy shall save me. I had better get the cheque cashed at once. Oh, dear Mrs. Barrett, thank you, thank you for leaving it to me.” At the bank she learned to her surprise, that they could not change it, and the clerk explained the mystery of the two lines across it.

“But I have no banking account,” she said.

“Then the simplest way would be to take it back to the drawers,” he suggested; “their office is only at the top of Chancery Lane, not a hundred yards from here.”

“Thank you,” she said, and hurried to the address: she felt as if moving quickly helped to give her courage.

The lawyers readily agreed to cash the cheque for her, and when she had signed it and some strange

mark had been put upon it, a messenger was sent to the bank. "I saw your husband yesterday, Mrs. Belcher," the senior partner remarked, and wondered at the start she gave.

"Yes? He went to the country this morning." She found comfort even in the words.

"And are you about to follow him?" he asked politely, trying to fill in the time.

"No, I'm going to a friend of my own at Bridgwater."

"I used to see him at Brighton sometimes during the winter." Then the messenger returned.

"Yes, he often went there from Saturday till Monday;" and she remembered how she had been left at home—though she had been thankful enough to be at peace—while he had probably been with somebody else, the somebody else he liked so much, and who was now free. Surely she was right to go away? She must and would—for ever.

"You have only twenty minutes to catch your train," the lawyer said, as he handed her the notes and saw her down to her cab. "I wonder what made that beautiful girl marry that brute Belcher?" he thought as she disappeared. "I wouldn't give much for her chance of happiness. I have a notion somehow that he doesn't know of this little legacy, and I shall not think it my duty to enlighten him."

Meanwhile, Katherine drove on to Paddington. She felt as if she carried a fortune, but she trembled with miserable excitement, for Mr. Belcher's blow haunted her, and fear—the fear that somehow he would overtake her even before she reached the shelter of Susan's little home at Bridgwater—half paralysed her. When

she arrived at the station she was at least five minutes too late for the train.

"I must wait for the next," she said.

By some accident her box, as it was being lifted from the cab, slipped and fell on to the pavement; the little straps gave way, the lid was twisted aside and one of the hinges wrenched from its bearings.

"I am very sorry, miss," the porter said apologetically, pushing back the contents of the trunk. "It was quite an accident. I'll tie a bit of rope round it."

"Oh, it doesn't matter. It can be mended at Bridgewater," she said.

"The next train doesn't go for two hours and a half, miss; you'd have time to get it mended. There's a shop where they'd do it not five minutes off; I'll get it carried there if you like." She looked at her property vacantly for a moment; it was so difficult to consider anything except the main object she had in view. Almost without knowing it she followed her box to the trunkmaker's at the corner. The man agreed to have it mended in a couple of hours or less; then Katherine went back to the station, and sat down in the waiting-room to rest and think till it was time to begin her journey.

It was still early,—it wanted ten minutes to eleven,—yet the day seemed to have been a terribly long one already. She found a quiet corner, and watched the people coming in and going out with their bags and wraps. They were so eager, so intent on what they were going to do, each one carried a history that seemed as if it must be not only interesting but important: and some looked happy. She huddled into her corner at

first; but gradually a half-frightened sense of adventure stole over her. She had never been a journey alone in her life before; and the fact that she was going to take it without the knowledge of any who had control over her, made even this visit to Susan seem a daring thing to undertake. She felt as if a terrible penalty must await it; but the penalty would not come, at anyrate, till the end of a week. She counted the days to Mr. Belcher's return. Six whole ones before he would drive up in a hansom to Montague Place, with Dottel—poor, ugly Dottel—on the seat, growling and looking out at the people passing by. He would ask for her, and hear that she had gone to Bridgwater without his leave, without telling him, and without his money, for she had left it on the mantelpiece in the dining-room. She wondered if he would telegraph, or write, or come. "But I won't go back," she thought. "I will stay with Susan all my life, or hide myself somewhere else." Then, stunned and dazed at the events of the morning, she fell half asleep, while some gibbering fiend whispered to her, "You will have to go back—you will have to go back—he'll make you, and then he'll treat you a thousand times worse than before. Some day he'll kill you."

"He won't," she answered in a dream, "for I will kill myself."

"You will never do that," the fiend said, "for you want to live; and if he does not kill you, you'll have to live years—and years—and years, all of them with Mr. Belcher." Then a voice in the distance that was wholly different—it seemed to belong to some pitying soul that stretched out its arms to her and was sorry—

tried to comfort her. "The world is very beautiful," it said; "you wanted to walk all over it; it is full of joy and sorrow and work to do, and somewhere in it someone has need of you, just as Mrs. Oswell said." The tears came into her eyes, and the old longings stirred in her heart, though she was too desperate to notice them.

"I know, I know; but I am stunned and blind and afraid," she answered. "What can I do?—where shall I go? Oh, take me and hide me away from the life I have known, and let me be happy—just a little bit happy and safe, and hidden from him!" She turned her head away, in order to show no sign to the people passing to and fro. Then there came to her a message from the past, with a little reproach in it for not having understood before. It was Mr. Oswell's talk at Windermere about the boats to the Mediterranean, and the little places along the coast that his wife had despised. Suddenly she saw it all, and knew what she was going to do. It seemed a daring, desperate thing, but she was a daring, desperate woman. "If I could get to one of them," she said to herself, "he would never find me. It would be far better than going to Susan." She thought of the blue sea and the mountains, and Mrs. Oswell's description of how the people ate macaroni and basked in the sun, and went to mass in the morning, and sat round their little oil-lamps in the evening. It all came back as if it had been but yesterday, but now the meaning of that chance talk seemed to be made plain. "He said the boats started from Southampton on Wednesdays. I remember quite well, and this is Wednesday! Oh, it is like a fate—it is like

the remark of Mr. Oswell's friend about the great mosaic. I will go—I will go at once. I wonder which station the trains go from to Southampton." But she was afraid to make any inquiries, lest Mr. Belcher should trace her by them, and drag her home gagged and pinioned to Montague Place. But chance again befriended her, for once in her wanderings she had passed a shipping office in Waterloo Place, and it occurred to her that the best thing to do would be to go there and inquire, even though she missed the boat for this week. She went quickly out of the station, and walked to the trunk shop. Her box was ready. She had it put on the top of a cab once more, then, breathless and eager, she drove to Waterloo Place, and found the shipping office. It was not the one for the South, but she was directed to it; and in a few minutes had heard all about the boats. They went every week, just as Mr. Oswell had said, but the day of sailing had been changed to Thursday. It was better; she might otherwise have been too late. She took her ticket for Genoa—it was the first place in Italy to which the boat went, and the only previous stopping-place was Gibraltar. From Genoa she could make her way to one of the little Italian towns she saw marked on the map that hung in the booking office. There seemed to be many of them along the water's edge: it gave her a thrill to remember that the water was the Mediterranean Sea. She felt as if she were stepping out of her life into a dream. She was roused from it with a start when the booking-clerk asked her name as he made out her ticket. She did not dare say Belcher; besides, she never wanted to be known by it again.

"Kerr," she said hesitatingly,— "Katherine Kerr."

"Miss Kerr?"

"Yes," she nodded; her ears listened to it gratefully, and welcomed the old name back again. She decided that it was better to leave London at once; the cab was waiting outside, she entered it and drove to Waterloo.

Four hours later she was at Southampton. The Windermere experience taught her how to enter the hotel, and desperation kept up her courage. She arrived in the afternoon, and, feeling as if she were travelling on farther into a dream, she walked curiously about the place, looking across to the Isle of Wight, or staring at the tall masts of the ships and the busy life along the shore. Everything was strange, as the setting of a dream. Once or twice she wondered if it could be her own self who walked about, or someone else into whom she had been changed. As if an impulse which was not her own controlled her, she stopped before a trunk shop and remembered her box, which had only been imperfectly mended, and was far too slight for a voyage. The shop was full of leather cases, P. & O. boxes, such as people usually take on board ship for their cabins. She had seen the passengers at the station arriving with them from other ships. So she entered, and bought one, and a Gladstone bag; and then, trying to imagine what else she needed to resemble an ordinary traveller, became possessed of wraps and other things that might help to disguise her if hereafter Mr. Belcher tried to trace her by description. All this was done by chance or fate rather than intention of hers. The old box was given to the chambermaid, who, seeing that Katherine

was young and sad, for some sympathetic reason told her that in a week's time she was going to America to keep house for a brother whose wife had died.

In the night, that first night she had ever been adrift in the world, with no one having knowledge of her whereabouts, some sort of reaction overtook her. The thing she was doing seemed so unbelievable when she calmly considered it. She was running away from home, from everybody who knew her; she was going out into the strange world alone, among people she had never seen, and to some place (for she did not mean to stay in Genoa) of which she did not even know the name, and that was only a vague idea to her. She sat up in bed and looked out into the darkness, while she considered her position in sheer astonishment. "Perhaps I ought to have gone to Uncle Robert," she thought. But she knew that, though he had given her two hundred pounds in case of an emergency, he would sternly disapprove of her conduct. "A woman must submit to the authority of her husband," he would have told her, and sent her back. Or Susan? Susan would send her back too. She was quite right not to go to Bridgwater. She wished she had written to Mr. Belcher before leaving his house, and told him that he was free, that she would never trouble him again nor cost him anything, and that he might marry anyone else if he liked, for he should never see her again. It would have been a good thing to do. She ought to have thought of it in London, for presently she would not dare to write, lest the postmarks betrayed her hiding-place. But it did not matter. He would be glad that she had gone, and go on with his life contentedly enough. He

had told her that marriage bored him. He did not even want to marry the woman he liked. It was the remembrance of this woman that helped to justify Katherine in her own sight.

"I will never go back," she said aloud. It was not as if she had made him happy, or as if he had liked her or needed her. She had only been in his way. If she had stayed with him, he would have broken her heart, or else—she looked up as if she were listening to something; it was the recognition of a strange possibility in her heart, and she could hardly believe it—or else he would have roused her and made her a bad and cruel woman, and some day she might have killed him. She understood now how it was that dreadful things were done. Oh, it was terrible! she thought. No people in the world ought to marry unless they felt that if no ceremony at all had ever been known, they would have lived together just the same all their lives, because they could not bear to be apart. That would be marriage, but they were not married—he and she—and she would never say that they were again. When she had arrived at this conclusion, she put her head down on the pillow once more and tried to sleep; but she dreamed that Mr. Belcher was sending down a shower of blows upon her, and awoke to realise, with shuddering thankfulness, that she was beyond their reach.

She went on board as early as possible the next day, and breathed freely as she went over the gangway. The stewardess told her that, as there were so few passengers, she could have a cabin to herself. The possibility of a companion had not occurred to her, but

she recognised the danger she had escaped. She tried to stay on deck and watch the hurry and bustle of getting away, but it was no good—she could not bear it. She went to her cabin and shut the door, and sat on the sofa-berth beneath the porthole, and looked at her new P. & O. box and the bag beside it, and trembled with exhaustion—the exhaustion of continual excitement, of fear and daring. There were voices and footsteps coming on board, and the loud click-clicking of the crane hoisting bales of goods on to the deck. Then the donkey-engine began and presently the ropes were gathered in, and the captain's voice gave orders from the bridge; it was all like music to Katherine's ears. More going up and down and crowding and talking, the occasional rattle of a glass or dropping of some heavy load, a shriek from the funnel and the stoppage of the donkey-engine, a tremulous feeling that shook the boat, and the rushing of the water at the side.

“We have started,” she cried, and rose to her feet. She threw off her gloves and hat, and, kneeling upon the berth, looked out of the porthole. Yes, they had started. The shore was receding farther and farther from the ship. She looked at the widening sea with a strange, unbelieving joy: an indescribable sense of security took possession of her. Suddenly her eye caught a gleam of gold; it was the wedding-ring on her third finger. With a quick movement she drew it off and flung it into the water. “It is all over,” she cried, “and I am free!”

CHAPTER X.

FOUR days—a long draught of freedom and contentment. The sea had been rough, but it was deepest blue now, and the sunshine was pricking it with gold. Light and warmth seemed to fill the world; a happy breeze swept past the ship, touching the travellers on its way. Katherine's face had lost the hunted look it wore the day she came on board. The captain stared at her with undisguised admiration, and wondered what might be her history. Her fellow-passengers were disposed to be friendly. But, luckily, reserve was natural to her; it stood her in good stead now, and helped her to keep them at a distance. "Sensible girl," a middle-aged man going out to Venice said to himself; "she knows her own business and means to mind it." The ship arrived at Gibraltar on the fifth day, and the passengers went ashore for a few hours. It was early morning; the market was crowded, the main street full of life. Katherine hesitated; she was half afraid, but, telling herself that she was alone, and hoped to be so for ever, gathered courage. She walked a little way towards Europa Point, then the courage fled; she turned round quickly and went back. "Not yet, not yet," she said to herself. "I know it is beautiful, but it is so strange, and I am blind and deaf, and feel safe nowhere but on board." It was a comfort to see the ship

again. She sat on deck and watched the Rock and its wonderful gardens, which were a mass of bloom, and the people moving to and fro: she looked across at the African coast on the other side, and thought how wonderful it was to see the edge of another quarter of the world. Mr. Belcher and Montague Place seemed to have passed out of her life, but the events of the last week had left her tired. By-and-by she would feel better.

The day wore on, and the passengers' began to return. "They will ask me questions if I stay here," she thought, and went down to her cabin again—that blessed little cabin in which she had sealed her freedom when she flung her wedding ring through the porthole. It was so good to lie with the porthole open, and to feel the sweet air coming in—air that Mr. Belcher had never breathed—and to hear all the sounds of happy life from the shore. She heard voices as of arrivals, and heavy luggage being carried on board—quantities of it. It was put down with a thud on the lower deck, ready for carrying below or into the cabins. There was a light footstep, and a woman's voice said merrily—

"What a clean little ship it is! We shall enjoy our three days on board her." The speaker passed Katherine's cabin-door.

"As long as the Immortal doesn't mind it, I don't care," a man answered. "If he does mind it, and he's going to be next us, I do."

"Look after the Mummy, George darling, and I'll take care of the Immortal," the woman, whose voice seemed familiar to Katherine, answered back. Then there was the sound of the donkey-engine beginning

again, and more footsteps and voices and confusion and hurrying, and she knew that the ship was being made ready to move. She longed to go on. She had discovered that she loved the sea and board-ship; it made her feel like an infant being rocked in a huge cradle by a wise and loving mother; she would be sorry when they reached Genoa, but that was three days ahead—three good days of life to live. How beautiful it was to be alone! “I should like to spend a lifetime in this dear ship at sea,” she thought, as she looked up at the sky through the porthole. The donkey-engine had stopped, the Rock was going backwards, the ship had started. She waited another hour in her cabin, then put on a shady hat and went out. There were only two or three people on deck; the middle-aged man was reading a novel, and the German husband and wife who had come on board at Southampton stood watching Gibraltar as the ship sped on away from it. Suddenly she came upon an old lady in a deck-chair, sitting by the wheel-house; a shawl was wrapped round her shoulders, a railway rug had been put carefully over her knees.

“This must be the Mummy,” she thought. A closely-written letter was pinned to the railway rug so that it might not blow away: its owner read it again and again while she knitted. She looked up as Katherine passed, and her ball of brown worsted rolled on to the ground. Katherine picked it up, and saw by chance that the envelope of the letter pinned to the railway rug had an Indian postmark.

“Thank you,” the old lady said. She was not very old,—sixty, perhaps,—but she looked delicate and even

feeble. She had grave dark eyes and a sallow complexion, and quantities of soft grey hair, half hidden in an old-fashioned white lace cap. There was something stately about her, and Katherine thought to herself, as she turned away, "I wish my mother had lived and looked like that, and had loved me." Two people came up the companion and passed by her; she did not see their faces, but they were evidently young. The man was tall and soldierly, the woman was graceful. They went to the old lady.

"Are you all right?" asked the man affectionately.

"Your things are arranged in your cabin," said the woman, and again the voice sounded familiar; "the Immortal is happy, and so are we."

Katherine walked the length of the ship and came back to meet the strangers face to face; with a little cry of surprise she recognised one of them and hesitated.

"Kathy!" The speaker was pretty and piquant: she held up her hands with delight and surprise. "My dear thing! How did you arrive here? Don't you know me? I was Alice Irvine and went to Mrs. Barrett's." A little dismay took hold of Katherine, though her face lighted up with pleasure. "I wondered what had become of you," her friend continued. "I should have gone to your castle, only I know that the Ogre didn't allow visitors."

"I thought you were in India"—Katherine answered, and stopped short. She was glad to see her friend again, but she had wanted to see no one in the world who knew her by name or could in any way identify her with the life she was leaving.

"We were in India, of course, but we went back

just a year ago, so that the baby might be born in its native land—in English native land, you know. It's downstairs with the ayah. And this is George; his other name is Alford, and so is mine, but he's much nicer when you call him by his Christian name. I have been married four years."

"What a long time!" Katherine said awkwardly, and stood hesitating.

"I was much older than you," Mrs. Alford answered. "I see you are not married yet;" and she looked down at Katherine's ringless finger. "Who is with you here?"

"No one."

"No one? You can't be going about alone. Are you going to Mrs. Ramsey at Genoa?" Mrs. Alford asked, as if a sudden solution of the situation had struck her. "You were always a favourite, you know; she used to declare you would do something if you studied. Oh, here is George," for her husband had sauntered away to give the friends a moment in which to exchange confidences. "Now shake hands, you two."

"I have often heard of you, Miss Kerr," he said. "How was it you never wrote to us?"

"Because I never wrote to her. She lived in a castle with an Ogre," his wife explained. "What has become of him, Kathy?"

"He has gone to Australia to look after some grandchildren he heard about."

"And who is taking care of you?"

Katherine's voice trembled as she answered again, "No one." She could not explain on the spot that she was running away from her husband; but she felt as if

the terrors of the position were beginning to overtake her.

"I was at Woolwich this time, but only for a day," Mrs. Alford went on. "I had seen Mrs. Barrett's death in the paper, so I didn't go to Shooters' Hill; there was no one left there I wanted to see except you, and I knew the Ogre wouldn't let me in, besides I wasn't sure whether you remembered me and if you were still there."

"I wonder if she saw my marriage in the paper," Katherine thought; "if she was in India perhaps she didn't."

"And are you really going to Mrs. Ramsey at Genoa?" Mrs. Alford asked again, as if she felt sure it must be so.

"I don't know yet. I will tell you presently. Where are you going?"

"At present, my dear, we are all going to Genoa too. That is George's mother," and she nodded at the knitter.

"She looks such a sweet old lady."

"So she is," answered Alice Alford fervently, and a longing for the near relationship of life laid hold of Katherine's heart. "She is a dear. She is delicate and cannot go about much, yet when we had to go to Gibraltar she came out with us, and we had a lovely winter. Now George has to go back to India,—his time is up,—but he won't let me go till the hot weather is over, though I should be perfectly happy at Simla. Besides, my people are there and I want to see them. However, one great beauty of a husband is that he saves you the trouble of making your own big arrange-

ments. He leaves all the little ones to me, of course—the sun isn't hurting you, is it, Kathy?"

"Oh no. Do go on." It was so interesting to have this intimate talk with her old friend, yet while she listened Katherine felt more and more that her own history would be very difficult to tell. Must she tell it? She felt instinctively that Alice would disapprove of it, that she would sympathise, but she would say, "Go back, or write to him, or do something—anything but this." It seemed to the girl, frightened and alone in the world, that the only alternative would be to jump into the blue sea going past the ship, or, as she waited for the homeward train, to lie down with her throat on the iron track. The train would come along so swiftly, it would all be over in a moment. But she wanted to live, she was young and strong and longing for happiness, and life was sweet. And freedom! the little taste of it that she knew already made her, when now and then for a moment she realised it, delirious with joy. "What are you going to do?" she asked, bringing herself back to Alice's concerns, and not quite sure that she was speaking coherently.

"George is going back alone; he has a brother at Lahore—civil appointment. I am going to stay at Como or somewhere for the summer with the Mummy, take her back to England in October, and then sail away all by myself from Southampton to my dear old man in India"—

"And the baby?"

"Oh, he'll go everywhere that I go. He doesn't count, he is a part of me. We have managed very cleverly—left George's heavy baggage, and some of

mine too, at Gibraltar, the P. & O. will take it on board there in ten days' time, and we have all skipped on ahead, so that George may have a week with us at Milan or the lakes before rushing on to Brindisi to overtake his ship. Now is it all clear?"

"Quite clear. It must cost a good deal of money—all this travelling?" Katherine was beginning to think of money now that she was alone.

"Yes, but that does not matter. George is well off now, and some day he will have his Uncle Horace's money. Jim will have money too, and he has an excellent appointment. George here, and Jim in India, and their mother, constitute the Alford family. She loves them both; but she adores Jim, and is miserable because he has been very ill; but he is getting better, and going to Simla. Simla is the place where all lively Indians under thirty go to when they die—if their ghosts don't care to come home—not that Jim is going to die, bless him! He is only twenty-seven, and as handsome as he is high, which is five foot eleven. All the same, I prefer George myself. I wish I were going back with him to India, and I could look after Jim then. As a matter of fact, I was going, and a niece was coming out to go to the lakes with the Mummy, but she broke down at the last moment, married a man who looked like a nigger, and went to China instead. Some people have no morality," she added, as her husband sauntered back to them. "I think it makes them more amusing, but George would be shocked if I said it before him. He's a beautiful dear," she added, looking up at him saucily, "but he is the properest person

in the world; so is his mother, so is Jim—the most adorable Jim.”

“What are you talking about?” her husband asked, laughing.

“You, darling. I never talk about anything else if I can help it. I was saying that you and the Mummy and Jim are all three very straitlaced, and that a little crookedness would be rather amusing. But I only say it to shock you, dear,” and she made a face at him; “I don’t mean it. I believe at heart I am just as straitlaced as you are.” Those words froze Katherine’s lips. “The Alfords are an eminently virtuous and highly respectable set, I assure you,” she laughed, “and would not do anything off the beaten track for the world. By the way, we don’t want the Mummy to know that I am only staying behind because the niece broke down, it would make her so uncomfortable—we pretend it is only on account of the hot weather.”

“Why don’t you take her to India?”

“Her health wouldn’t stand it, poor darling. She must go back to England in October too, for she has built herself a new house, all bright red bricks of course, at Chilworth in Surrey. Elizabeth, who has been with her for years and years, and the other servants are getting it ready; and she must go and live in it. Oh, but I do long to go with my old man!” she said, with a long sigh. He stood watching a game of quoits being played on the lower deck; but as if he knew that she was speaking of him, he turned his face towards her with an expression that even Katherine could not fail to understand.

“They are in love with each other,” she said to

herself wonderingly, with the sense of witnessing a new phase of human nature. For even the Oswells, always on easy happy terms, did not look at each other as these two people did.

"And now, Kathy dear, tell me, where are you going? I always called her Kathy," she explained to her husband, who had followed up his look as if he wanted to be near her for a moment, "because there is something austere about Katherine—which doesn't suit her. Give an account of yourself. You have told me nothing yet."

"You haven't given her a chance," Mr. Alford laughed, and went back to the players again, so that he might not interfere with confidences. Then Katherine explained that she was merely going to Genoa, and did not know what she was going to do afterwards.

"But surely you are going to Mrs. Ramsey?"

"No, I had not thought of her, but"—She stopped for she remembered the dreams in the woods at Shooters' Hill. Perhaps they would come back again; and if Mrs. Ramsey gave lessons in Genoa, and would take her as a pupil once more, in time she might paint a picture. She thought of the mornings she had sometimes spent in the National Gallery. All the painters whose pictures hung there had once known as little as she did now, and who should say but what, if she worked hard, and strove hard, and dreamed again,—for in dreams the unattainable suggested itself,—she might some day put a picture into the world that would stay and stay for ever, among people she would never see and whose names she would never hear.

"But what?" asked Alice Alford. "You are as dreamy as ever."

"—But I think that if she would take me, and let me study with her, I could be content."

"And is no one with you here? You can't really be by yourself, Kathy? It wouldn't be right at your age, though you were always alone. I never saw anyone with you even when you were a child."

"And I am alone now," Katherine answered. "I like it," she answered with a satisfaction she could not help; but she dreaded more questions.

"You poor thing! you appear to be let loose on the world. Are you rich?"

"Yes," she answered. "I am let loose on the world, and have all my fortune with me."

"Good heavens! You are just like a fairy story. Is it much? We'll rob you."

"A little more than two hundred and fifty pounds."

"Has the Ogre cast you adrift with that noble sum?"

"He hasn't cast me adrift." She could not bear that Uncle Robert should be judged unjustly. "He'll give me more if I want it."

"But why have you left Shooters' Hill?" Mrs. Alford asked. "And why didn't you go to Australia with the Ogre?"

"The lease of the house ran out, and the Ogre did not want to take me to Australia."

"What became of the disagreeable-looking old servant who used to look out at the gate when we were coming home from our painting expeditions?"

"She was ill, and went to live with her own people."

"I see. Then there was no one to take care of you, so the Ogre gave you some money and left you to look after yourself"—

"Alice,"—a frightened look came into Katherine's eyes,—“he did his best for me, he did indeed.” She clasped her hands in a manner that was peculiar to her, and felt as if she must get away from these questions. “You don't know Uncle Robert.”

“No, dear, I don't, but with the strict sense of propriety of which I boasted just now,” she laughed, “you must allow me to observe that I don't think it is right for you to be roving about the world without a chaperon, and I shall play the part of one to you on board this ship, and tell Mrs. Ramsey to look after you very strictly in Genoa, or we shall have the Italians fighting duels over you. Don't you know that you have grown very beautiful?”

“No.”

“Well, you have. So now come and see the Immortal, for it is nearly six o'clock, and he must go to bed. He is the beautifulest Immortal that ever you did see. Wait one moment,” and she went towards the old lady, then turned back and took Katherine's hand. “Come with me,” she said, and led her to Mrs. Alford, who still sat knitting with her face looking seawards. “Mummy,” she said, “this is Katherine Kerr whom I knew years ago, when we were at Woolwich, before I had ever seen George.”

“How do you do?” Mrs. Alford held out her hand. “You picked up my worsted just now. I am glad you are a friend of Alice's. I wondered who you were.” She looked up at Katherine, and again there went

through the girl's heart the longing for a mother—"It would feel like home, and there would be help and rest in it,—and love," she thought.

"And will you believe it? she is all alone on board, going out to Genoa to study painting," Alice exclaimed, quick to believe what seemed to be the probable course of events.

"Did your friends trust you?" Mrs. Alford asked, while a little smile showed that she, too, thought her beautiful.

"There are no friends," Katherine answered; "and—and," she added shyly, "I do not mind being alone."

"We are going to take care of her while we are on board. Come;" and Alice led her away.

"You seem so happy," Katherine said, much as she had once said to Mrs. Oswell.

"Happy?" her friend answered, with more gravity than she had displayed before. "I should think so! Why, I'm married to the dearest man on earth, have the sweetest little baby, a grey-haired angel for a mother-in-law, and all the other belongings are perfection. Heaven will be thrown away on me if I ever get to it. I have everything that is lovely on earth;" and she gave a sigh of contentment. "Don't you think George is very handsome?"

"Very," Katherine said, with a laugh in her blue eyes.

"He's just the sweetest, beautifullest old darling you can imagine," his wife remarked, with extreme satisfaction. "I think I know all about you, Kathy dear," she went on. "The Ogre has deserted you; given you some money, and left you to look after yourself. You can't be very happy, I'm afraid."

"But, Alice dear, I am a waif about whom no one cares. And I like being alone, and mean to go about alone, looking at the world. It is so beautiful, I always feel as if it were my own big estate—it is as much mine as anyone else's—and I'm so proud of it!"

"What a funny idea! But you always had funny ideas. Do you remember the crane, and how you used to think that Ann Boleyn danced with her head in her pocket?" And then they laughed, and went to see the Immortal. It was a soft little thing, with yellow hair and blinking blue eyes. Katherine stooped and kissed it, and looked at it curiously.

"May I hold it for a moment?" she asked, and took it in her arms, and felt afraid, and realised again how unused she was to ordinary human experiences. "What a wonderful thing it must be to have a little child of one's own!" she said. "Only I think one ought to love—to love its father very much."

"Why, of course," Alice said, staring at her. "If one didn't, it would be horrible."

CHAPTER XI.

PEOPLE soon know each other well on board ship. Before they reached Genoa, Katherine was as intimate with the Alfords as if they had been together for a year. But they were far more at ease with her than she was with them, for they had nothing to hold back, and she had nothing she could tell. She felt that marriage made a difference. If Alice had not had a husband, and so learned to look at life with him and from the married point of view, she would have told her everything. But Alice represented her husband and his views as well as herself and her own views, and the remark she had made about the Alford love of proprieties and her own sympathy with it helped to seal Katherine's lips. So with the old lady. Every hour she felt herself more and more drawn towards her, but between them rose up the barrier of forty years and more—forty years, and no experience in them made a sign by which the girl of twenty could gather courage to tell her own troubles and perplexity, or to speak of that she had dared to do. "She would be shocked, she would never understand," Katherine thought, and the knowledge of all she was afraid to say made her more silent than ever; but it chanced that the silence fascinated the Alfords more than any confidence could have done.

"There is a reserve about your friend, my dear Alice, that wins me," the old lady said. "It delights me, when she sits by me, to watch her face; she has quite a remarkable expression for a girl who has known so little of life, and she is full of dignity. She is what I should like a daughter of my own to be."

"Oh, you angelic Mummy," Alice answered, without a spark of envy or self-consciousness, "you are quite right, and she always had that manner even when she was a child. I used to feel as if she lived in a dream and that some day if she woke she would not be there." Mrs. Alford looked at her daughter-in-law for a moment and shook her head.

"That is one of your little flights of speech, my dear," she said, with a smile.

"Yes, Mummy, and this is one of my little flights of kisses," Alice answered, stooping over the grey hair for a moment before she went to seek her husband.

Katherine, watching them, and not knowing in the least that she had been the subject of conversation, wondered how it felt to be them, and whether, if they knew her history, they would understand what she had felt not only lately, but all her life. She did not think so, and she was doing them no harm by being silent; she did not owe them her confidence, kind though they were to her. Her life was her own, and that part of it that had concerned Mr. Belcher was finished, and she could no more speak of it than she could open a grave and hold up the dead within. She did not feel that she had committed a crime in what she had done, but rather that she was justified. Her marriage had been a mere mockery of one with a man of whom she could

not think without a shudder. Thank God, she had left him! She looked forward, and not behind, feeling that with every hour she was journeying towards life and freedom: already she was tasting their sweetness. She was almost happy—for she chased away disturbing memories—for the first time in her life.

She delighted in the Alfords—in Alice's ceaseless chatter and George's slow indulgent tones, in the little soft Immortal, and, above all, in the old lady. She had never known one before. She liked to look at her face and watch the somewhat old-fashioned ways that were lovable, yet that would help to make it impossible—Katherine felt it even then—to give her a difficult confidence.

"Are you not afraid to face the world alone," she asked Katherine, "even though you are going to live with a friend, and to pursue your favourite study?"

"No, dear Mrs. Alford. It seems to me that the farther one goes on into the world the better it becomes: I could never be afraid of it."

"You have more courage than I have, for since my niece has failed me in order to be married—I am glad she has, if it is for her happiness"—it seemed from her voice as though her whole history had taught her that the joining together of two people must in all human probability make for happiness. Katherine felt that the world she had entered must be very different from the one of her girlhood: for Uncle Robert's marriage with Aunt Evelina had evidently not been an unmixed joy, and her own marriage had represented vigorously enough the vague idea in which she had been brought up, that a husband was a feminine necessity, but a tyrant, or at

anyrate a master, with whom lay all the strength and advantages of the union. Now all this theory was vanishing. Mrs. Oswald and her husband, and the happy folk, two and two, she had passed in the London streets had helped to dissipate it. She was beginning to feel that the greatest promise of happiness lay not in freedom, as she had imagined,—“that is, save for me,” she thought blankly,—but in the close companionship of man and woman.

“It is an anxiety to me,” Mrs. Alford went on, after a minute or two, “that my strength is not equal to insisting on Alice’s going back to India with her husband. She says she is waiting for the cool weather; but that is only an excuse.”

The next morning they were at Genoa.

“Come with us to the hotel,” Alice said, “and after breakfast we will look up Mrs. Ramsey’s address together and make out your future.” Katherine gladly accepted the invitation, for though the place looked like an enchanted city, she felt very lonely in it.

“How beautiful it all is!” she exclaimed, as they sat drinking their coffee under a long, drooping pepper tree in the garden of the hotel. “If one died to-morrow, or had to live the dreariest life, it would still be a great deal to have known this one good day.”

“I think the whole time has been delightful. I liked those days we had on board together so much. I am glad the ship was a little slow-coach,” Alice answered. “But life is a wonderful thing, dear Kathy, and full of joys.”

“She is quite a philosopher,” George Alford said, with his lazy smile. “I’ll take you a turn round the

garden, Mummy, if you like," he added, turning to his mother. The old lady rose, and, leaning on his arm, went towards the orange trees in the near distance.

"He did that on purpose," Alice explained, "while I unfold a plan we have. We don't want to deliver you up to Mrs. Ramsey and a palette yet. We are going to Milan for a week. Then George must go eastwards, and his mother and I to the Italian Lakes. Well, we want you to come to Milan with us for a week, as our guest, dear Kathy?"

"Oh no, no!" The world was becoming too good a place to be real, she thought.

"Yes, do. We want you—the Mummy said it would cheer us all up, and so did George, for we shall be rather sad with our parting so near us. You never came to see me at Woolwich, now you can make amends."

"But I want to begin studying."

"So you shall at the end of the week. We'll see you safely into your train for Genoa. I want you to come, Kathy. See, they have gone indoors—let us go up to my room. We may never be together again, for at the end of the summer the Mummy and I are not going home this way, but by Lucerne, and when I sail to my old man in India next October, it will be by the P. & O., which will not stop at Genoa, so that I shall not be able to see you even if you are still there."

"But"—

"Yes, dear, yes;" she pushed Katherine down into the easy-chair by the long open window in her room; "it is all arranged. The wise woman submits when she cannot help herself. Now we will rest for an hour, and then we will struggle to find out Mrs. Ramsey's address,

and go to her. Wait, I must hunt among my belongings for an Italian dictionary. I suppose it is in this box. There is nothing like a shilling phrase-book for learning a strange language: I must get one. Oh Kathy, I want to show you this—it is Jim's portrait—the Mummy's adorable Jim. What do you think of him?"

Katherine looked at the photograph. It represented a grave face with a studious expression; but there was a twinkle in the eyes, that was evident even in cardboard. He had a fair moustache and good clear-cut features. He was not violently handsome, but sufficiently so, a manly and rather distinguished-looking Englishman.

"He looks good and kind and clever," she said, and she thought, "Oh, if Mr. Belcher had been like that!"

"So he is—all that and more. They are both dear good boys."

Mrs. Ramsey was not to be found in any school in Genoa. With a great deal of trouble they made out a former address, but she had gone away, and no trace of her remained. The woman who lived in her flat thought she had gone to England—she was not sure, it might have been to France—the Signora had never talked much of her affairs to anyone. She had given up her pupils, all of them, and Signor Devallini had taken them, but he also knew nothing of Mrs. Ramsey, save that she did not mean to return to Genoa. To Katherine the disappointment was not great. She had not even thought of Mrs. Ramsey till Alice had suggested her. Her first idea had been to go to some little Italian place, and now she was free to carry it out;

and then alone, and with time at her disposal, and enough money to last her for a couple of years or more,—for she could live so frugally,—she might try to work out her own salvation in art.

“The first masters of all had none to teach them,” she said to Alice Alford; “and though they were geniuses, and I am not one, yet I can at least grope along till my eye is truer and my hand more sure. I would rather study by myself; it will not be so easy to imitate an individual, if there is nothing but Nature to copy.”

“You are quite right; but it perplexes me to think of your being alone. Of course, if you were thirty, and frightful, it would not matter.”

“But I have always been alone,” Katherine answered, without the slightest intention of being untruthful, for she had never counted her husband as a companion, and the long days in London were in her mind while she spoke.

“Well, don’t let us discuss it now—we will do that most solemnly at Milan. We must be getting on our way early in the morning, and to-night we must dine and go to the opera. Come and see the Immortal before you go to your room.”

Jim Alford’s portrait was still lying on Alice’s table. Katherine took it up and looked at it again. Alice stood for a moment watching her, and a little smile came to her lips.

“George, I have a brilliant notion,” she said to her husband, as they walked in the public garden at Milan the next evening. Katherine, pretending that she was

tired, stayed in her room, so that the husband and wife might be together and alone as much as possible.

"Yes, darling?" He was used to the brilliant notions, and waited for them with resignation.

"I shall invite Katherine over to India next winter. I should like her to fall in love with Jim. She couldn't help it, and it would settle so many difficulties."

"Suppose you had her over and it didn't come off?" She looked at him with amazement.

"But it would come off; neither of them could help it. You see, some day, if Uncle Horace dies, you will have to come back and do your duties as a landowner."

"Yes, dear; the duties mean remitting one-third of the rents, and spending another third on repairs, and"—

"And being very happy on the last third, as we shall always be on anything or nothing."

"If we are only together." For in his heart he hated going to India without her.

"If we are only together," she repeated, and clung closer to his arm. There was a seat near them under some trees.

"Let us sit down," he said.

"Well," she continued, "if we do have to come back and live in England, it will be very lonely for Jim all alone out at Lahore. He ought to marry, and he could not find anyone half so nice or so lovely as Kathy in all India."

"He certainly might do worse." Mrs. Alford felt that it was a great thing for her husband to say. "What I can't help thinking about is her immediate future. It

is a very odd move for a beautiful girl to be so utterly adrift."

"I know," his wife answered despairingly. "I can't bear to think of it either, and her face is so pathetic; I am sure she is very lonely. She is happy because she is with us, but she means to be alone all the summer. I can't think what she will do, or where she will arrive some day. She says she is a waif, and going to live at some little Italian place and work at her painting."

"She and the mother had better join on."

Mrs. Alford was silent for a minute, and then she clapped her hands.

"George," she said, "you always think brilliantly, even by chance. Why shouldn't she and the mother really join on? why shouldn't I go back to India with you, and Katherine stay with her for the summer? Oh yes, George?"

"Too late now," and he shook his head, "or it might have worked."

"But is it too late? Listen, dear: I have been miserable at the thought of staying behind. I can't bear the idea of your going alone. I want to be near you. Even if I go to Simla, I should be in the same country with you, and I could take care of Jim. I want to be with you—I do, darling, indeed I do. Take me back with you, and let the mother and Kathy be together. I will manage it all if you only agree," she entreated breathlessly. "I believe she was sent whirling down from heaven on to the little ship on purpose to keep us together;" and, suddenly bursting into pas-

sionate sobs, she threw her arms round her husband's neck. Luckily only the trees and the gathering shadows were there to see.

"My dear little woman!" he said, astonished at her vehemence. "I didn't know you felt so much about it; you didn't tell me"—

"What was the use of telling you when there was no help for it? I didn't want to worry you. But she is there, just as if Providence had taken her ticket and arranged it, the sweetest girl I ever knew. The Mummy likes her far better already than she ever did Rose Tasker. I am glad she is married, or there could have been no chance of Kathy. Now is the time to tell you, for the help has come."

"I thought the Immortal would have been ample compensation for my going away."

"Oh no! How can you be such a goose?" she laughed. "He is our ownest baby, our very littlest in the world; but no woman on earth, worth a pinch of salt, puts her child before the man she loves. I want *you*, George. Oh, say I may go, and I'll manage it all with Kathy and the Mummy, I will indeed. It is the happiest thought that ever was imagined." He bent down and kissed her.

"I have thought all along that it would be horrid without you," he answered. She felt, as she walked back to the Hôtel Cavour, as if the public garden were a great cathedral, and that her heart was brimful of thankfulness; for all things that she desired had been given her. She went first to the old lady and then

Katherine to unfold the new idea, and to coax them to agree to it.

"But I can't," the latter exclaimed. "It isn't that I don't like her, for I do. She is the most beautiful and sweet old lady in the world; but I can't—I can't, Alice."

"Then you will keep my George and me apart, and if you will let us, we can be together. Just think, I am only asking you to be her daughter for six months, to stay at lovely places till it is warm enough to go up to Generoso, above Lugano, and stay there. You would be so happy with her, and she would love you, and if you consent, I can go with my dear one. Why, Kathy!" for Katherine had stood silent at first and then suddenly covered her face with her hands and shuddered. "Is it so terrible, dear?"

"No, no, it would be everything in the world to have just one six months in life as you say. Perhaps she would love me."

"She does already,—and she will."

"I can't believe that she would care to have me."

"She longs for you—she has taken an enormous fancy to you. I spoke to her—just now—she is waiting for you. She doesn't want George to go back alone, and she wants me to go to Simla, so that I can look after Jim. Come to her—come and see;" and before she could think of any words with which to object, Alice had led her to the next room.

Mrs. Alford was writing letters; she rose as the friends entered.

"Mummy, I have brought you a six months' daughter," Alice exclaimed.

"Do you think you could really join your plans to mine?" the old lady asked almost tenderly. "It would be such a comfort to me to know that Alice was with her husband and near my other boy in India."

"If you think"—Katherine began, but she was afraid to go on. Mrs. Alford bent and kissed her.

"I think we shall love each other," she said.

CHAPTER XII.

THEN passed, all too swiftly, eight weeks of blessed happiness. They were spent at the little places on the Italian lakes, each one, so it seemed to Katherine, lovelier than the last, just as each day that went by seemed better and sweeter to live through. Mrs. Alford was most gentle and affectionate to her, but never very near: the little stateliness in her manner remained.

"I feel just as if I had an unmarried daughter with me," she said one day, and put her hand on Katherine's head—a gracious and even loving hand.

"And I, as if I were with my mother," the girl answered, with all her heart; but the silence was unbroken.

In late June they arrived at Mendresio, and went up Monte Generoso the next morning. In those days it was spoiled by no horrible railway—it was merely a beautiful mountain in Italian Switzerland, with a good but simple hotel half an hour from the summit, and a farm and a few scattered dwellings for the peasants and goatherds. The hotel was whitewashed outside, the lizards ran over it in the sunshine. There was a little flight of stone steps leading up to the entrance, over which hung the great bell that clanged to announce an arrival. In front was a plateau that formed some sort

of garden, and had a summer-house at either corner. But it has changed too little, in spite of "improvements," to make description necessary. It was a little early and chilly for a mountain-place; but the old lady took a sitting-room with a fireplace,—the only one on that floor,—and when the evenings were cold they sat by the crackling wood and talked of India; of Alice and her husband, who were at Bombay; and of the Immortal, who was growing more beautiful every hour, so the weekly letter told them; and of Jim, who was slowly getting stronger. It seemed to Katherine that, though she had never seen him, she knew Jim best of all, for his mother loved him best, and never tired of talking about him. His portrait was on the little table in the sitting-room; his mother used to turn her face towards it as she entered, and Katherine, noticing it, sometimes put the wild flowers she had gathered beside it. "He has such a good face," she thought, "I don't wonder his mother is so proud of him." Mrs. Alford, watching her one day, smiled a little to herself, and wondered if the two would ever meet, and vaguely through her mind there went the idea that if Jim married, she would like it to be Katherine. She wanted him to marry; it would be better than facing the Indian life alone.

"My dear," she said one day, "we are very happy together. How grateful I am to Alice!"

"It is the happiest time in my life," Katherine answered. "I want nothing better in the world;" but even as she said it, she knew that it would only go on for a little while. She had felt that from the first, and lived in each hour as it went by as if to gather in its every

moment's sweetness. "It is amazing that it should have come to me."

Mrs. Alford caught the pathetic note in her voice and wondered at it.

"I think sometimes that you have not had a very happy girlhood, my dear. Was your uncle unkind to you?"

"Oh no, he was kind. He had lived alone so long, he could not always understand what a girl felt; but that was all." And Katherine's lips closed, though the longing to speak was in her heart. She looked up at Mrs. Alford with an appeal written in her eyes. But no; in spite of all its sweetness, there was strength written on the old lady's face, and even a capacity for sternness. "I will live these days right out to the end," the girl thought, "and then vanish into space with the memory of them. Six months, and only two of them are gone!" she added thankfully.

There were few people at the hotel at first, but, as the days went by, more and more arrived. Katherine used to watch for them, and think how good it was to see them coming up from the plains below, happy in their holiday time, or seeking health on the beautiful mountain-top, with hope written on their faces: overworked men and delicate women, and some who were like to die, but did not know it.

July had nearly gone. "Another month," Katherine said to herself, "but a good one to remember."

The world was full of summer and drowsy happiness. A deep blue sky was overhead, the little fleecy clouds rested on the mountain-tops lower down. The sound of distant goat-bells was shaken out now and

again into the stillness—a tinkling sound that brought with it a vision of the mountain side, and the little steep pathways that human beings had seldom trod. The hotel was fast filling up; the arrival bell sounded many times in the course of the day; the dining-table grew longer; there were piles of luggage in the hall. But nothing disturbed the beauty of the place; even its atmosphere of stillness remained.

Mrs. Alford and Katherine kept to themselves, and were wholly satisfied with each other.

“We do not want to talk with strangers,” the former said. “It is impossible to know who people are in hotels, nor what burden you may be taking on yourself with a new acquaintance. I am very shy of making any.” They were sitting in the summer-house in the far corner, away from the house. A woman of five-and-forty, alone and worn-looking, had stopped as she passed them, asking if she might borrow *The Pioneer*; an Indian paper, she explained, which reminded her of the days she herself had been out there. It might contain some names that were familiar to her. The paper was lent in a distant, courteous manner, and she received no encouragement to stay. “I remember once having a terrible lesson,” Mrs. Alford went on, when the woman had gone towards the house. “It was when my sister and I were in San Remo some years ago—the year the boys first went to India—we made acquaintance with a Mrs. Simpson, a pretty woman, with a little boy of six, to whom she was devoted. We thought she was a widow, but it turned out that she had run away from her husband”—

“Perhaps her husband had ill-treated her?”

"That would be no excuse, my dear. A woman must stay with him even if he ill-treats her, just as she must put up with her life even if it is full of pain. She has no business to run away from the one nor to dispose of the other."

"Suppose she were made to marry a man she disliked?"

"She would be a weak person, and very foolish." Mrs. Alford's manner became almost stern with unconscious conviction. "There is a law, even if it is only an unwritten one, in regard to all things, and those who transgress it, whether from sin or through folly, must alike pay the penalty."

"It is a little hard."

"Many things are hard." Mrs. Alford was unyielding. "If they were not, it might be better here and there for the individual, but it would be worse for the majority."

"And you think that if a woman is married to a man she does not love, through no fault of her own, she ought to stay with him, even if he is cold and unkind to her?"

"She must stay with him unless he sends her away," was the uncompromising answer. "It is part of a woman's duty to prove that marriage is sacred and binding, and everything she does to weaken it she does to the disadvantage of her whole sex."

"But if the man doesn't love her?"

"She should try to win him, or bear her lot in patience. I have seen many homes broken up, and children made unhappy, because, for the sake of others, one individual would not bear the lot that, after all, might have been a worse one."

"You must never know; I must never tell you," Katherine said to herself, and the desire to do so passed out of her heart. "There are many ways of looking at the same things, and each may be a right one, but the person who sees from one point cannot sometimes see from another," she thought, as she looked up to watch the lizards running up the house in the sunshine.

The postman came slowly up the last bit of pathway, crossed the quadrangle, and entered the hotel. A little group awaited the opening of his leather bag in the bureau.

"Katherine, do you never get any letters?" Mrs. Alford asked. Her gentle manner had come back again.

"No, there is no one to write to me; my uncle is in Australia. There is an old servant, but she does not even know where I am." She gave a long sigh, for she often wondered how Susan was, and whether Mr. Belcher had sought her at Bridgewater.

"You must be very lonely, dear child!"

"I like it," Katherine answered. "I like being with you, but I don't want to be with anyone else, and when you go back to England, I shall stay somewhere out of it alone and work." Her heart was satisfied at the prospect, and her voice showed it.

"You are a strange child," Mrs. Alford answered, looking up and trying to see into her heart.

"But a very happy one," the girl answered in a low voice, "for I am with you, and I love you."

"And I love you, dear Katherine. I loved your face from the first moment I saw it."

The first week in August. A still and sultry afternoon. Mrs. Alford shut herself up to write letters for the Indian mail. Katherine was leaning out of her bedroom window—a narrow slip of a room, looking south, and towards the plains of Lombardy. She could see two or three turnings of the pathway by which the people came up from Mendresio. They walked up in those days, or rode on mules, or were carried in chairs by muscular porters; and the great bell rang when they were seen on the last turn of the pathway before they reached the plateau. Katherine used to look down from her window, for it was in front, and watch them come towards the little double flight of stone steps before the door, while the landlord hurried out to welcome them, and the mules were unloaded. Once she thought how terrible it would be to see someone arrive who had known her formerly, and for one moment the thought paralysed her; then she remembered that Mr. Belcher did not travel, and that Mr. and Mrs. Oswell were certain to be in England, so she put aside her fear, and gave herself up to the glorious summer and all it had brought her. She was so happy, so full through and through of sweet content. She was living the natural life of a girl who is with her mother; she was loved and cared for, and spoken to with caressing words for the first time in her life; she drank in joy every moment of her life, and wished that she could live it over and over and over again. As for the past two years, they were like an evil dream that had vanished with the morning time.

While she looked across to Lombardy, thinking that

she ought to have made a sketch that morning for Mrs. Alford to enclose in a letter to India, a little bit of white, low down in the distance, caught her eye. It was the white linen cap of a stranger who was coming up the pathway. He was twenty minutes off yet, and she knew that he would be out of sight again in a moment. She reached down the opera-glass the Alfords had given her at Genoa and looked at him. He was on foot, but a mule carried his luggage, and the mule-driver lagged behind. She could tell that he was a tall man, that he wore tweed clothes, and a glass was slung across his shoulder. She did not see his face; he kept it turned towards the plain till he was lost among the fir-trees, and she knew that a good ten minutes must pass before he emerged from them on the pathway higher up. Then she thought of the woman ill with consumption in the next room but one to hers, who had said by accident one day that she had left off having afternoon tea because it mounted up her bill. She was evidently poor from the manner in which she said it: she tried to make her tone disagreeable in order to disguise her poverty. Ever since, at four o'clock, Katherine had made some tea, using Mrs. Alford's tea-basket, which she had borrowed, and some tea she had bought herself at Genoa after finding how bad can be the mixture that goes by the name of tea on board ship. She rang for the milk and lighted the spirit-lamp to boil the water. Then she remembered the stranger coming up the pathway, and went back to the window. He was just by the nearer turn. She watched him for full two minutes, and made out that he was young and fair; something about him attracted her.

"Five minutes more and he will be here," she said to herself, and went on with her tea-making. She carried a cup to Mrs. Alford at the end of the corridor, and poured out one for the consumptive woman, and as she did so, there was the clang, clang of the arrival bell. She went to the window and looked out. The stranger was crossing the plateau, that had a summer-house at either corner. She turned away and knocked at the door of Miss Bennett's room.

"Come in!"

"I've brought you some tea."

"Oh, thank you," the woman said sourly; "but I'm not sure that it agrees with me." She got up from the sofa on which she had been lying. "It's very good of you to take so much trouble," she said, as though she was half bored by it. But she took the tea in her thin hands and gulped it down eagerly.

"I will come for the cup in a few minutes," Katherine said, and hurried to her own room. Walking straight to the window, she looked out. The stranger had just arrived. She looked down, trying to see his face, not expecting that he would see her. But, as though he had known she was there, he raised his head, and they took a long look at each other. She knew him directly from his photograph. It was Jim Alford.

CHAPTER XIII.

KATHERINE heard him come up the matting-covered stairs and go along the corridor; someone was showing him the way. She listened to his footsteps—and the sound of them was like music to her; but she did not stay to wonder why. He stopped at the end of the corridor, knocked, and called "Mother." Then she sat down with a happy smile and imagined their meeting.

Mrs. Alford opened the door quickly, and fell into her son's arms. "Oh, my dear," she said, "this is a surprise!"

"Thought you would say so," he laughed. "They agreed not to tell you that I was coming; I wanted to drop down upon you unawares."

"My dear, oh, my dear, my dear!" she said again, as she pulled him into the room and pushed him gently into one of the velvet-covered chairs with arms, beside the window; "is it really you?"

"Yes—at least it seems like it."

"And are you better?" she asked, looking at him as though she could hardly believe that she was awake.

"Oh, I'm all right."

"Are you sure?" she asked, looking at him with keen and anxious eyes.

"Yes, it's all right now, dear, though I have been pretty well riddled with fever. However, it has got me

six months' leave, so I oughtn't to grumble. Six months, Mummy! think of that. We can go to Jericho together if we like."

"We'll go to England, my son, and that will be better. Tell me how you managed the journey."

"Not much to tell," he said cheerily. "I managed with some diplomacy and a good many certificates to get leave. Went by easy stages to Bombay, took ship and sailed to Brindisi, crawled along here. That's all. George and Alice send their love; the baby's a bouncer, and more beautiful than ever, so they tell me. Spent a day with them in Bombay and heard all about you. What have you done with the pretty girl they found for you, is she here still? Alice's friend, I mean."

"Yes, she's here,—and will be so glad to see you, my dear." Mrs. Alford's face lighted up while she spoke of her.

"Oh! will she? That's your idea, Mummy. If she's the one who put her head out of window as I arrived, I shall be glad to see her. How long is she going to stay with you?"

"Till I go back in October."

"That's all right, then. Now let us talk about somebody else. I was so sorry about your illness last winter—nearly came home, with or without leave." He took his mother's hands and kissed them. "Still it was a comfort to you, wasn't it, having George and Alice and the baby? By Jove! what a fuss people make about a baby when they have one for the first time. It is a pity they don't begin with twins; upon my word I think it would keep them quieter. What is your pretty girl called, Kathy something, isn't it?"

"Katherine Kerr," the old lady said vacantly, too much overjoyed to do more than look at him. "You must come and see her. She brought me some tea a few minutes ago. My dear, you must want some; she would make you a cup—let me ask her."

"No, thanks, rather not—don't care about tea, and there's no hurry about her," he said, holding his mother back affectionately. "It's good enough to see you."

She looked at him long and fondly. "You are handsomer than ever," she said; "but you don't look well."

"I shall soon," he answered, laughing. "I believe you are more beautiful than ever, since we are paying compliments. What sort of people are staying here?"

"I haven't looked at them. You see, I have Katherine."

"I shall call her Kathy, as Alice did."

"You must call her Miss Kerr."

"All right, Mummy, I'll mind my manners. Look here, I must go and do some unpacking, and then we'll have a long talk. I forget what number they said my room was, but it's a floor lower down, and I daresay I shall find it."

"I'll come with you to the end of the corridor, and we will knock at Katherine's room. I want her to know how happy I am."

Katherine heard their footsteps stop by her door, and, opening it, stood facing them.

"I watched you coming up," she said to Jim. "I'm glad you are here. Mrs. Alford has been so anxious about you." She looked at him with clear blue eyes

that were tender enough when they turned to his mother—it proved their capacity, he thought.

“I saw you leaning out of window,” he said merrily, “and guessed it was you. Alice was always talking of you, and George joined in the chorus.”

“And the Immortal?”

“Only cried. No doubt he’ll do better by and by. I hope you like this place, Miss Kerr. The Mummy has been very happy with you.” He put his arm round Mrs. Alford’s shoulder as they walked away.

“You must take him some walks, my dear,” the old lady said, looking back. “She has had to go alone, poor thing,” she continued to her son, as they went downstairs. “For I am not able to do much; I was never a good walker, you know.”

“You weren’t bad, not what we call a strider, but”—Then their voices were lost in the distance. Katherine went back to her room, and, sitting down with her arms folded, looked out into space.

“He is very handsome,” she thought. “He is much better-looking than George; and how fond he seems of his mother. It was good to see them together.” Then, just because her heart was light and hungered to take a little brightness somewhere, she went to see the consumptive woman again. “I am so afraid to intrude on you,” she said gently, “but I know you are not strong. Could I not do anything for you? Would you like me sometimes to read aloud? Perhaps it would help you to go to sleep.”

“No, thank you. I never heard any reading yet that satisfied me,” said Miss Bennett ungraciously. “You had better sit down,” and she nodded at a chair.

"When people read aloud, they always seem to give the author their personality. I would rather keep my literature undiluted."

"I know what you mean," Katherine said. "I cannot imagine a human voice, for instance, that would do justice to Browning." Miss Bennett gave a grunt of disapproval.

"I don't like Browning. You can take that volume of him away, if you like," she said, touching a book on the table. "I found it in a railway carriage."

"You don't want it?"

"No; I am not well enough for him. He did not write for sick and tired people. Besides, I dislike poetry. Prose is good enough for anything worth saying."

"Oh, don't say that. Between poetry and prose there is the same difference that there is between speaking and singing."

"And speaking is better than singing, unless it is better than any that I ever heard. Poetry is never good enough, and singing is never good enough. Nothing is good enough in the world. That is what I have found, but I started expecting too much, and nothing has satisfied me."

"I expected nothing," Katherine answered, "and started knowing of nothing to expect, but everything seems to be growing more and more beautiful as I journey on." She hesitated a moment, and went on gently, "Sometimes, perhaps, we miss the best—we do not read the best poetry or hear the best singing, but that does not prove they do not exist. It would be

like arguing that there were no mountains, because we lived all our days in a city."

"Tell me about yourself," Miss Bennett said abruptly. "Why are you with Mrs. Alford? Is she a relation?"

"She is no relation—only the mother of an old friend. I do not want to talk about myself—you must forgive me," Katherine said a little distantly. But Miss Bennett was inquisitive.

"Have you no relations?" she persisted.

"I have only one, and he is abroad."

"The lives of women are beaten out very thin," Miss Bennett said discontentedly, as Katherine rose; "they have to lean on each other if they have no man to lean upon. It is always so, and if they are alone they are miserable. I am not, because it is only for a little while,—besides, I am too tired to worry about things any more,—but that is why women herd together so often. You had better go, I should like to rest a little while. You can take away the Browning—I dare say you will read it—and those flowers. Mrs. Ball, the woman with the thin husband, brought them; but I dislike cut flowers, it disturbs me to see them die."

"I never thought of that," Katherine said, feeling that after all there was some tenderness in the gaunt woman with the discontented voice. "I will arrange them in my room, and you shall come and see them only while they are fresh. It's too late for you to go to the Bella Vista to-night, I know, but I'll come and see if you are able to walk there in the morning. Good-bye, for we sit so far apart at dinner, and you have so many friends at table, that I never come near you downstairs."

"Not friends," said Miss Bennett; "they are only kind to me because"—she waited till the door was shut—"they think I'm going to die—except this girl: I don't suppose she thinks that anyone can die while she herself is strong and happy."

Katherine went to Mrs. Alford, for she knew that Jim was still downstairs. The old lady was standing in the middle of the room, looking as if she were trying to realise something that was too good to be true.

"Just one moment to tell you how glad I am," the girl said gently, and held out her hands. "It was a beautiful surprise for you, and I don't wonder that you love him so much."

"My dear, there is no one like him in the world—like him and my other boy; but Jim is my youngest, and I am so proud of him." Her voice was low and full of happiness. She took Katherine in her arms, and kissed her as if from thankfulness to the day for its portion of joy. "He's the strongest man I ever knew, and as tender as a woman."

"I could hear it in his voice," Katherine answered; "and I am so glad for you—hush! he is coming. I will go away till dinner-time." She hurried softly back along the corridor, passing Jim on her way. "Your mother is waiting for you," she said, and turned a radiant face to him. "You will have nearly two hours together before the dinner-bell rings;" and she passed on. She entered her own room again, an unaccountable happiness possessing her.

The watch on the table beside her—it was the one that Uncle Robert had given her—pointed a quarter to six before she rose from her reverie. "Dear Uncle

Robert!" she said, as she noticed the time; "I wonder if he has found his children. I wish I had been a better companion to him all those years, but I was so afraid, for pain and trouble had made him stern. Perhaps some day I shall dare to go to him." She brushed out her hair; it was long and dark, with a little natural curl in it that made it fall softly on her forehead; she twisted it up into a large knot behind, as the Greek women twisted theirs in centuries gone by, and fastened into her waistband a little bunch of the flowers Miss Bennett had despised. She met the latter on the stairs. "Let me take you down," she said. "Mrs. Alford has her son;" and she drew Miss Bennett's arm through hers.

"You can't like being troubled with so helpless a creature," the woman grumbled.

"I am sorry—so sorry for you, but I am glad to be near you, because I am strong, and one's strength is like one's money, to be handed on—there's such a joy in spending it." She took Miss Bennett to her place at the far end of the table, then went to her own by Mrs. Alford. Jim entered five minutes later, and sat down on the other side of his mother; but Katherine was conscious of his presence every moment. She heard his voice each time he spoke, and knew when he looked her way. To think that he was going to stay there—with them—every day, perhaps for weeks to come, seemed the strangest thing on earth.

They went out of doors after dinner. Katherine tried to leave the mother and son together, but he came swiftly up to her as she was taking a side path towards the farm.

"My mother thinks that if I ask you very humbly, you will perhaps take me to the Bella Vista," he said.

"I will take you without the humility," she answered; "but would you not like to stay with her this first evening?"

"She says it will only take us twenty minutes to get there and back, and then we can drink our coffee with her."

"Then let us start;" and they walked on together.

"She's the handsomest girl I've seen these five years," he said to himself. "Wonderful expression her face has—both brightness and sorrow in it."

"How long are you going to stay?" she asked.

"I have six months' leave. My mother talks of remaining here for a bit; then we shall go to England. And you?"

"I have no home," she answered, with a strange little smile, as though the knowledge pleased her.

"I know," he answered; "Alice told me. Your belongings consist of an ogre in the shape of an uncle—the description is hers, of course, not mine—who went to Australia."

"He isn't an ogre, though he did go to Australia—I am fond of him."

"Beg pardon," he laughed. "I daresay he's awfully nice, and personally I'm rather inclined to ogres—though he isn't one, you say. But are you going back for the winter?"

"No; I am going to stay abroad."

"Where?"

"I don't know yet; I never look forward."

"That's a good idea," he said, with a gravity that

surprised her. "If the present is worth anything, it's better to make the most of it. You'll think me an awful duffer, but I want to sit down on that seat there, if you don't mind. I have not been through with my fever very long, and that pull up to-day was rather a long one." His face was pale, he was trembling with cold. "It's nothing," he said presently, with a shudder; "the plaguy thing comes back to torment one now and then."

"You have been very ill, I know."

"I was rather bad," he answered lightly; "but it's all over now, except at odd moments; makes one feel oneself rather a duffer, or it would not matter. I am getting all right again. It was awfully good of you to take care of the Mummy, Miss Kerr—heard all about it from Alice." He looked at her gratefully. "Funny thing you should meet, after all those years, on board that little ship. Alice told me about Shooters' Hill, too, and the crane and his one leg, and Eltham Palace. There, you see, I'm quite set up in your history."

"I know a little of yours; but not much. You live at Lahore, and"—

"There isn't any more, except that I have a house there, and live in it all by myself."

"You ought to be married," she said simply.

"Never saw anybody yet I wanted to spend all my life with. Did you? Let us go on a little bit farther."

"Shall I give you an arm?" she said, without a bit of coquetry.

"There's something very straight about this girl," he thought, "and she's quite beautiful to look at. No,

thank you," he said; "but I will take it if I can't get along. Am all right at present. Did you?"

"Did I—what?"

"Ever see anyone you wanted to spend all your life with?"

"No, never," she answered fervently, "never; but I think," she added, "that people are very wonderful. I have felt that more than anything else lately," she added, as if she spoke from conviction rather than experience.

"Yes, I'm sure they are—uncommonly good lot, on the whole—a few exceptions, of course."

"Oh yes; there are exceptions," she said slowly.

"Beastly shame!" he thought: "someone has helped her to find that out already. I should like to know who it is, and make things a bit uneasy for him or her. Hullo! here we are!" he exclaimed, as they came upon the Bella Vista. "By Jove, it is splendid! I'd no idea that it was so fine." They stood looking in silence on the magnificence that had suddenly burst upon them.

"It makes one so thankful for life," she said; "to look at it is compensation for years—that—that—have been different."

"You speak as if you had seen some bad times already," he said gently.

"Oh yes, I have seen them," she answered, with a scared look in her eyes that came and went in a moment.

"I expect we all get our share. It's a good thing, perhaps. We none of us know much till then, or understand it, at any-rate."

"Perhaps; but don't let us talk of anything but

happiness," she said, looking up with a smile. "This is such a beautiful day for your mother, we ought to help her celebrate it. Come, let us go back; the coffee will be ready."

"I wonder if we could ever get down to that lake," he said, taking a last look at it; "I mean to Lugano."

"There is a little pathway down," she said. "I went along it for a mile the other afternoon while your mother slept."

"We will try it one day," he answered, as if they were old friends, and it was a matter of course that they should explore together. "By the way, are there any books at the hotel?"

"There are some novels in the library," she said, as they took their way back, "and I have got a stray volume of Browning Lyrics."

"We'll bring it out next time we come here; it will fit in with the surroundings. But it's a dangerous book for two people to read together."

"Dangerous?" she looked up at him.

"Very."

"You look tired, my son," Mrs. Alford said, as they entered the summer-house.

"Yes, Mummy," he answered: "even the happiest day one has known for years can wear one out a bit. I have had a splendid little walk."

"I shall take you one every day," Katherine said, with a little smile, and left them together.

"At the end of a string," he said. "That's a wonderful girl, mother. There is so much in her face; but I believe she has been ill-used at some time or other."

"She never says so, but I fancy that her uncle must have ill-treated her."

"Old ruffian! I daresay he did."

They went to Bella Vista again the next night, and up to the summit of Generoso two or three mornings later to see the sunrise.

CHAPTER XIV.

"It is such a comfort that you are here, my dear," Mrs. Alford said to Katherine, "for I cannot walk, and but for you, there would have been no one to take Jim about."

"And he's not to be trusted alone, I suppose?" he asked merrily.

"No," said Katherine, "neither am I; that is why we are sent together."

The rest was only natural: in a week they were greatest friends, in a month, the happiest month of Katherine's whole life, they set their lives entirely by the wishes of each other—and they were young man and young woman. There was but one thing to come of it: he knew it from the first day, almost from the first moment he beheld her. He was not quite sure that he had not fallen in love with Alice's account of her, and certainly Katherine had been vaguely in his thoughts all the time he journeyed towards Monte Generoso.

Mrs. Alford saw how it went with him, and was delighted. She laughed a little to herself, and pretended to be blind and to see nothing, and prided herself on her discretion. She wanted her boy to marry. She dreaded his going out to Lahore again alone. "A

wife would take care of him," she thought, and she had seen no one she liked so well as Katherine. Her reserve, her belief in the world, her absolute contentment in being cared for, her delight in simple pleasures, and a certain courtesy of manner that distinguished her, all appealed to the old lady, who considered the girls of the present day undignified or frivolous.

Sometimes they went down to Lugano on foot and searched among the covered streets for curios; and lunched at the hotel, and took the train back to Mendresio, and rode up on mules to Generoso in time for dinner—a whole day to themselves. And often they went on sketching expeditions that were more dangerous still. Jim could draw rather well, and dabble with colours, and he was an excellent critic. All things helped towards one certain end, and each one seemed to count as more than years of ordinary acquaintance. Mrs. Alford stayed at home during all their excursions, well satisfied to think of them together. She saw clearly how it was with Jim, and she could not believe that any girl could help loving her boy. At anyrate, she was determined not to let Katherine go from her till she could not help it.

"I wish you would come to England with us, my dear," she said one afternoon; "there is room for you in the house at Chilworth, and I shall be all alone when he goes back to India in January. Couldn't you come back with us?" Katherine was putting on her hat, and Mrs. Alford could not see her eyes, but there was terror in her voice as she answered—

"I can't go to England, dear Mummy; keep me till

the last moment before you go, and then I will take my separate way."

"You are so young to be alone."

"I know; but it has to be." She turned towards the glass. "I read a story-book once," she said suddenly; "in it was a description of how lives were given out for people to live. They were done up in packets and all mixed up by the hand of Fate. As the people were born into the world, Fate handed them a packet, in it was the life they had to live. They never knew what was going to happen to them except in that first moment which they could not remember. But each one's life for good or ill was inevitable—he had to live it. You are going home with your son, dear Mummy, and I am going on."

"Where?"

"I don't know yet; but I shall soon."

"My child, it may be that you are to come to England, though you do not know it."

"Oh no," and she turned away again.

"Katherine," the old lady said, trying to see what lay behind the troubled eyes, "I do not know what your life was there, but I think you have been very unhappy."

"Yes," and she nodded her head, "I was very unhappy. I never had any happiness at all, save that which the beauty of the world gave me, till I left England, and saw you that day on board ship. Here is Jim"—for they had soon learned to call each other by Christian names. "You see, you and Alice were school-

fellows," Jim had explained, "and that is one reason why we should not treat each other with any respect; and then we are not in London; and we both like the Mummy; and, lastly, it's such a bore to be Miss Kerr-ing and Mr. Alford-ing each other, and we never do it behind each other's backs." Her face lighted up as he entered, and with a sigh of relief she chased away her memories.

"You appeared to be having an argument when I entered," he said, as they went on their way to the farm. "What was it about?"

"We were talking of the end of September."

"Leave the future alone," he answered. "I believe in getting all the good one can out of the present."

"Sometimes one is forced to think about the future against one's will."

He looked at her for a moment before he answered. She wore a white dress and a big white hat. She looked tall and slim and very young; but there was a womanly sedateness about her that was restful. He could imagine her living a simple country life, busy with daily domestic affairs, and finding intellectual employment enough for herself when they were done. "She would look uncommonly well," he thought, "at the head of a table, or riding. By Jove! how she would like the early morning Indian rides, and how proud a man would be of her, too." He thought of his house at Lahore and the stillness that filled it now, and the courage it would take to break in upon it alone. But it would not be alone if he could win this girl beside him.

"That is true; I have thought of it too a great deal

lately, though as a rule I try to avoid it. But I have had such good days in India, especially at Lahore. If the Mummy keeps well and fever keeps its distance, I should like the future to be as the past—plus one. And you?”

“I want it to be quite different from my past,” she said quickly. “It will be. I am going on to places I have never seen and to people I do not know.”

“But have you left no people you care for behind?”

“There’s Uncle Robert, but he is in Australia; and Susan, she has her own people; and Mrs. Oswell, she has her husband. There are no others—no others in the world except the Mummy and you, and Alice and her husband and the Immortal.”

“Couldn’t you pull me out of that little crowd and give me a place to myself?”

“It might be a bad place.”

“Anything is better than a crowd. But do you mean always to be by yourself? You know, some day you might want to get married.”

“Oh no; never, never!”

“Well, that’s encouraging,” he thought, and they went on for a few minutes in silence. The pathway, marked out by a primitive railing, was only wide enough for one, yet somehow they managed to walk abreast. They sat on three-legged stools at the farm, and drank milk out of little bowls, while the bottle that Katherine had carried in a straw basket on her arm was filled for

the benefit of Mrs. Alford and Miss Bennett, who considered that tea was the event of the afternoon.

"We must walk over here on Sunday," Jim said, as they went back. "The goatherds and the milkmaids dance in the evening. Our landlord's daughter was telling me about it to-day. We will come and look on; it will be another memory."

"Yes."

He drew her hand through his arm. A sudden remembrance of Mr. Belcher made her shudder.

"This pathway is constructed for people to walk so," he said. "It is better than going separately, especially when you don't want to talk; and we are not in a very chattering humour this afternoon."

"Sometimes one lives more keenly in silence."

"What are you thinking of, Kathy?" Though he called her Katherine when he had occasion to call her anything at all, he had never called her by that name before. She had not heard it since Alice said good-bye on the platform at Milan. Her heart gave a strange leap for joy but a little caution unknowingly took possession of her, and put her on her guard. Even so, as yet she suspected nothing.

"I was thinking," she said, "that no matter what happens to us, we should still be very thankful for our turn of human life. I am so glad I am not a stone or a star instead of a human being."

"You are a strange girl," he answered. "I wonder if you know"—

She drew away the hand he had taken. "I don't know anything," she said, with a little smile that some-

how seemed to put him afar off, "except that we are nearly back again."

That night she understood. She stood before the open window in her room, thinking over their walk, and all they talked about, and how his face had looked, and what his voice had been. She remembered every moment they had spent together, every pathway they had trodden, every inch of road, and every word that he had said. Her pulse had stirred if his voice had changed, if his hand had chanced to touch her. She thought of him, or was conscious of him, of his life in the world, of his nearness, every moment of the day; and all her thoughts went home to him, and all things in her heart were mentally put before him. His praise of anything she did was a joy to her, his absence even for a little, an impatience, his fancied disapproval of a word she said a weight upon her heart. He filled her life and made her absolutely content. The Mummy was sweet and dear, the world was very beautiful; but they were only the setting, the background to him. They had been everything a little while ago, but now—now it was different. This joy that was beyond all happiness had never been possible till he came. The world was filled with the breath of heaven, and she drew it into her heart. She looked out at the dark firs and the shadowy mountains; they seemed to slumber and to dream of something that she would understand before the sunlight came. She looked up at the sky. The stars were shining into her room, they saw her, they seemed to know and to tell her. She looked back for a moment in dismay. "Oh, can it be that?" she wondered. "Is

that the reason—of it all?—I am in love—with Jim Alford. I love him!” and with a long sigh she put her head down upon her arms that were leaning on the window-sill, and hid her face. It seemed as if the darkness came, deeper and closer, and gathered round her; while she whispered into it, “I love him—better than my life!”

CHAPTER XV.

SEPTEMBER was creeping into the autumn. The nights were darker and longer, and the days were growing chilly.

"What a happy summer it has been!" Katherine said to herself, as she watched the sunset. "If it would only never come to an end! I wonder if the Mummy dreams how happy I am." But it was of Jim she thought. Everything had changed since he came. He and she remembered so much now—books they had read and sketches they had made, long saunterings in the sunshine and the twilight, and talks of many things in which each had listened eagerly to hear what the other had to say.

But the summer was nearly over. Sometimes the winds that gathered on the mountain-top had even a nip of winter in them.

"We ought to be getting to the plains," Jim said to his mother one night while they sat over the wood fire. Katherine had not appeared since dinner. It had seemed lately as if she preferred to spend her evenings alone. He looked at the clock once or twice, and towards the door as a footstep came along the corridor; but he turned away when it passed on. "I wonder what Kathy is doing?" he said at last.

"I think she likes to go and see Miss Bennett."

"I daresay; it appears to me that there's very little goodness of which she isn't capable. I have seen a good deal of her all these weeks, and have come to the conclusion that she is a very remarkable person."

"I shall be sorry to go home without her."

"Take her with you."

"She won't go, my son; I have often asked her."

"I expect the ogre bullied her. Mother, should you be glad if she cared for me?"

"Do you mean if she would marry you, Jim?"

"Yes, I mean that. I don't believe she would; for, though she seems to like being with me, she has never given me a word of encouragement all the time. I have grown fond of her," he said, and stooped to kiss the grey hair. "I never cared for any other woman in my life, and I don't feel as if I could face going back to Lahore without her."

Just for one moment the old lady sat silent. Had not her son loved her best all his life? Even though she had wished so earnestly that this should be, a little dismay came into her heart when she realised that someone else had taken possession of him, but she swept it away.

"I'm very glad," she answered tenderly. "She is the sweetest girl I have ever met, and the one I could most desire for you. I often think how different she is from the underbred and over-educated young women we are always meeting nowadays."

"That's rather severe," he laughed. "But you are a dear mother. I say, if she won't go to England, couldn't we go on somewhere else and take her with

us? Not to an hotel, for I always feel like a tame cat after a week in one; or else the women who sit and purr to each other, and the men who play draughts in the evening, make me feel unpleasantly murderous. Let us take a villa to ourselves somewhere, with a garden for you to walk in, and not on the top of a confounded mountain—I beg your pardon, Mummy, but, you see, I can't do much climbing with Kathy—some place where we could drive about a bit, or perhaps she and I could ride.”

“You had better speak to her first.”

“Not too soon,” he said, shaking his head; “she is a little hold-offish—I'm afraid to rush it.”

“Shall I try and find out?”

“No, I would rather try my own luck. We are going out in the morning to make a sketch from the top—a present to Miss Bennett. She said she hated photographs. Perhaps something will come of it; but don't ask me. I will tell you when there is anything to tell.”

The door opened and Katherine walked in. “May I come?” she asked. “They are playing Consequences downstairs, and I am tired. There's a new novel left behind by the people who came up yesterday, and went down to-day, and here it is: I stole it for the Mummy.”

“I like to hear you call me that, dear,” Mrs. Alford said, looking up with a smile. The colour came to Katherine's face, but she went on as though she had not heard.

“Miss Bennett is very angry because she was asked to write her confession in somebody's book, and she

put down that her idea of happiness was silence, and the very young man—who is, I think, a student—said he didn't believe it."

"Miss Bennett was having a row with the landlord this morning," Jim said. "I heard him remark as I entered the bureau, 'Unless that is done, mademoiselle, we will consider that you leave on Saturday.'"

"Perhaps it is because she has not paid her bill. I am certain she is poor, and she is going to die," Katherine said, dismayed. "I don't mean yet—I mean that she will never get well. She is in a consumption; the doctor downstairs told me that. He said she was hanging on to life in the strange manner that people do sometimes, long after its joy has ceased. And she is poor: she betrays it in her face and her shrinking tones, and the things she denies herself. It seems as if death and poverty were trying which could gain upon her first."

"Couldn't we get some money to her? It must be an awful thing to be dying and stranded," Jim said impulsively.

"Oh, I wish we could! But she is sensitive. It would be so difficult to manage."

"Oh—well, we will see. Are we going to do our sketch in the morning?" he asked, after a moment's silence.

"Shall we?" and she looked at Mrs. Alford.

"Yes, dear," the old lady said, and took the girl's hands and pulled her face down and kissed it, and whispered, "I want you to go with him."

Katherine drew back abruptly. "Alice and I used

to go out sketching long ago at Shooters' Hill," she said.

"As if you were sisters," the old lady said eagerly.

"Then Jim would be my brother."

"Oh no; sister to Alice would make me your brother-in-law, which is better. Sisters bully their brothers, you know," he added quickly, as if to cover too obvious a meaning. "I say, did you put down your confessions?" he asked, merely for the sake of saying something. "I wonder what your idea of happiness would be?" She hesitated a moment.

"Freedom. It is the most blessed of all things."

"There is a good deal of nonsense talked about it," he said shortly; "it depends upon what you mean by freedom. Explain, mademoiselle."

"I can't," she answered. "I am tired, and must go. Good-night;" and with a kiss to the old lady, and a look to him, she went slowly from the room.

He looked after her for a moment. "You women are strange beings, Mummy dear," he said in a puzzled tone. "But it is getting late, let us separate also. I have some letters to write, and the post goes early."

"Good-night, my son."

"Now, then," he said, when he was alone, "let us see what can be done for Miss Bennett." He looked up between the lines of his letter of instruction to England to think about Katherine. "I can't make her out," he said once or twice; "she is not a bit of a flirt, and if I'm not an ass, she has sometimes looked as if she cared about me; but she has a manner that makes her absolutely unapproachable. There's a curious mixture of simplicity and reserve about her that I ex-

pect takes a more experienced hand than mine to manage."

But Katherine, standing before the open window in her room, was quite content. "I am so happy," she said to herself, "so perfectly happy—only I want it never to come to an end. That is impossible," she sighed; "so I must be thankful to have known him and loved him. I don't care what it costs me, or what I have to suffer for it by-and-by. If the pain is mine, so is the love, and so will be the remembrance. It can never make any difference to him; he will never know, and his mother will never know. Oh, it can't be wrong," she cried; "he shall never, never know—it can't be wrong!" She stopped before the volume of Browning, and, opening it at random, read as if in answer to her thoughts—

"Let us be unashamed of soul,
As earth lies bare to heaven above!
How is it under our control,
To love or not to love?"

"I wonder if he cares for me at all; but that doesn't matter, it can make no difference. I have to go my way and he to go his, and nothing can make any difference." A flood of memories overwhelmed her. "Oh, how could Uncle Robert do it—how could he be so cruel! For I did not understand—but, after all, the pain that I suffered was but the way that led to this, and to think that makes me even thankful for the misery at Montague Place. I'm glad—glad—glad," she added, with a long sigh. "Jim has no need of me, that is one comfort; he will forget me as soon

as I go, and while she has him, his mother does not need me. It is only Miss Bennett who needs me, if anyone does." She put out the light and went to the window again; she wanted to look out at the world and up at the sky and into space, and not to keep her happiness in a narrow room. "Why do people die for love, and why are they so miserable about it, I wonder? To know a man like Jim, and to love him, is surely enough to live for and be thankful. I shall be better all my life because of these days, no matter what comes after them. There is midnight as well as noon, and we must take both in our twenty-four hours. It seems such folly to grieve in the night, when one might lie still and think of the day and the happiness it brought one. That is what I shall do when I live alone in my little Italian place. I shall think of him and try to do all the good I can—if I am capable of any—in memory of these days in which I have been so happy."

There was no going out the next morning. It was windy and rainy; a thunderstorm was coming over from Italy, and the firs were wrapped in a heavy mist. "We must do our sketch another day," Katherine thought, looking disconsolately from the window on the staircase. The landlord's daughter came out of Miss Bennett's room; she hesitated and stopped.

"Miss Kerr," she said, "can I speak to you?" and she opened the door of an empty room. "I ought not to tell you, but I know you are a friend of Miss Bennett's, and perhaps you will not say that I have spoken to you. She has not paid us for some time; it is not much, for she looked so ill when she came, that my

father was sorry, and took her for as little as he could, but she has not paid anything at all for weeks. I think my father would forgive her altogether, for he feels that she is poor, and he is sorry for her; but she is so haughty, so bitter, and to-day she treated him with such scorn that he has declared she shall not stay any longer. I thought I would speak to her myself without his knowledge, but she is unbearable, and told me to leave the room."

"Let me pay her bill."

"Oh no! certainly not; but if you could say something to her, and make her a little more polite?"

"It is very difficult. I will try, but I would not hurt her for the world. Be good to her—she is going to die," Katherine said gently. She heard Miss Bennett coughing uneasily as she passed her door. She hesitated a moment, then knocked and put her head inside the door.

"I heard you coughing," she said apologetically, "and am sorry—the rain and mist are bad for you."

"Yes, it's the bad weather, I suppose." Miss Bennett looked worn out. "But I am always waiting for something that never arrives—now it's the sunshine. You can come in, Miss Kerr."

"It will be different to-morrow, and you will be better."

"Perhaps, but I don't know that I want to be better. I shall be glad enough when it is all over. Life is too difficult, a continual striving, and I am tired of it."

"It is very difficult," Katherine answered. "Even I know that, and you who are delicate"—

"Some people seem to find it pleasant," Miss Bennett said, contradicting, as she generally did, any agreement with her views—she liked to monopolise them. "The aimless people who come up here to spend money and kill time appear to like it."

"Some of them are not very happy," Katherine answered, thinking of the mother who sat at one end of the dinner-table every night and kept her anxious face turned towards a girl of seventeen who had no more chance of life than a snowdrop has of summer. "I wish we could share things more," she added suddenly. "If the people who have a great deal of happiness, for instance, could give some to the people who have none, if the strong could take the weak to places where they would get well"—

"I have nothing to share," Miss Bennett said scornfully.

"Oh yes," Katherine answered, a brilliant idea striking her; "you can share your anxieties with me, for I have none—now. And I am all by myself in the world, and I am strong and happy and have money. Why not share my things—my happiness and strength and loneliness? I would take you away to a warm little place in Italy for the winter, and you should get strong again. Let us begin at once," she added, "though we needn't go away from here directly."

Miss Bennett looked up quickly. "I suppose they have told you that my bill is not paid—or you heard me speaking about it in the bureau yesterday. It is not convenient to me to pay it just now."

"Let me pay it. I have plenty; and if by-and-by

you have plenty and I have none, you can do the same for me. That is what I am trying to propose—that we share things, you and I, for we are both alone in the world.” She put her hand on the sick woman’s and waited.

“I don’t want it, thank you,” Miss Bennett answered, in her usual ungracious manner, but her eyes looked grateful. “I have written to England. They can wait for their bill; I don’t care if it isn’t paid at all. They make enough by the English; let them lose a little.”

“But that would be so unpleasant for you!”

“What then? I don’t want to take a friendly leave of the world. It is better to feel a satisfaction in dying than a regret.”

“In dying?” Katherine repeated sadly.

“I know what is before me well enough.” She lifted her left hand from the table and stroked it with the right one, looking curiously the while at its transparency. “I know. What does it matter?”

“Why are you so bitter?” Katherine asked in despair.

“I have never been happy enough to be anything else,” Miss Bennett answered, and as she raised her face Katherine saw a world of remembered pain written on it. “I was miserable even as a child. Children were treated differently in my day. To scold and reprove and keep them down and give them scant measure was considered a necessary part of their bring-up. My mother was kind to us, but my father was harsh, and we were poor, and our relatives made us suffer when they got the chance. People like to carry

out their theories on those who cannot help themselves. They made me feel that I was only allowed to exist by favour of the more fortunate."

"But when you grew up?"

"Then I had to work. I taught from morning to night. When I had saved some money, I fell ill, and now I am spending it."

"You might forgive"—

"Why should I? Even God needed reparation before He did that: why should I, who have had no reparation, forgive? No forgiveness will undo a thing that is done or unbury years that are gone. My life has been ruined by hardness and selfishness. It was done to make me suffer, I suppose. I want to make others suffer in their turn sometimes, even if it is only by bitter words. What is the matter?" for Katherine had started. She remembered that Mrs. Oswell had said that disagreeable people were only giving back the blows they had received.

"Nothing, nothing."

"You are a good girl," Miss Bennett said in a softer tone. "You must not think I am ungrateful. I dare say you were treated differently. Things have changed for the younger generation."

Then Katherine went back to her room and thought awhile. "Now I understand," she said to herself, "and see the use and the divinity of Love. Out of it has grown the world's whole happiness; for all other things are but its children. To love well is the best good that can come to us."

"But there is work," something seemed to answer

her, as it had done in the waiting-room at Paddington the day she left Mr. Belcher's house. "It has done more than Love."

"Work is Love's sturdiest child of all," she whispered. "Perhaps some day, if only for love of what is beautiful, I may learn to do my share."

CHAPTER XVI.

SOME news came for the Alfords that obliged them to give up any idea of a villa abroad, so they arranged to stay at Generoso till the end of September, by which time, indeed, the majority considered it wise to descend, even though the hotel remained open. They meant to stay a week in Milan—that was Jim's wish—and then to journey home. The bracing air of England would do him good, he said, and fit him for a long spell of service at Lahore.

"Are you going to live there all your life?" Katherine asked.

"I expect so," he answered; "till I am sixty, at any-rate, and pensioned off like a respectable old buffer."

"And when are you going back?"

"In January. Meanwhile, there is the Mummy's house at Chilworth to see. She built it for herself while I was away."

"A red brick house standing alone," Mrs. Alford said, "near a wood. I wish you could come and see it, my dear." But Katherine shook her head ruefully, for she felt this summer holiday was fast coming to an end—less than another fortnight and it would be over.

Another fortnight! And then she would have to

go on into the world alone for the rest of her days. "But I don't care yet," she said to herself; "while there is a fortnight left, how can I trouble about what is to come after?" So youth and its temperament conquered, and as the clouds lifted from the mountain, the fear at her heart lifted too, and as the sun came out, it brought her promises, and intoxicated her with happiness and love. To look across to Italy or down at the firs, to watch for the morning postman, his leather bag slung across his shoulder, as he appeared on the little turnings of the upward path visible from her window, to see the strangers coming and going, and all the time to feel her heart brim over with life: what joy it was!—how could she think about the future?

A glorious morning at last, still and warm. Katherine and Jim Alford went out to make their sketch for Miss Bennett. He was silent with doubt and anxiety, for he was desperately in love with the girl beside him. There was something almost unreal about her to him. She had come from nowhere, she had no past, no pleasant memories to talk about. All he knew was that Alice had known her for a little while at school, that she had an uncle in Australia, and no home in the world. She was here by a chance, as though she had dropped from the clouds, and she was going—only Heaven knew whither. He felt sometimes as if she were in reality the waif she called herself just passing by. He wanted to stop her, to hold her fast, to take her back to Lahore, to give her all the things of which as yet she seemed to know nothing, and to feel that her aloneness had made her doubly his.

They walked on with the camp-stools and the sketching things. She was silent too, but it was from sheer contentment, that did not need words, not even his words, to make it better; and if she thought beyond the moment, why, the simple philosophy of the last few days comforted her. The sun was shining and the sky was blue; all about them Nature was at its best; beside her walked the man she loved. If she was no longer an unsophisticated girl in some things—for marriage even such as hers could hardly leave her that—love was altogether an ideal thing to her, and absolutely pure and unselfish. She was glad to love him, glad that he lived in the world, and exultant that the sweet summer morning had thrown them together for a few hours alone on the mountain-top, away from everyone beyond. And when they went back to the hotel, there would be his mother, whom she loved too, and there were still some days to come. Even when she had to leave these dear people, she would take with her the remembrance of the wonderful time spent with them, the knowledge that they had liked having her with them, and she would love them just the same always as long as her life went on. She looked up at him: there were tears in her eyes, and he saw them.

“Is anything the matter?” he asked.

“No. It is only that I wish all this could go on for ever.” It was an unwise speech.

“Why shouldn’t it?”

“All things must come to an end, or there could be no beginnings.”

“That’s a paradox, or philosophy, or—or a joke?”

he said, pretending to be dense. She laughed away her unshed tears.

"It is so difficult to make jokes unless you are used to it.—Nothing could be better than this point for Miss Bennett's sketch. Let us get to work."

They sat down and put their blocks on their knees, opened their little boxes of colours, arranged their brushes, and reluctantly worked for at least half an hour.

"Well?" he said at last.

"I think we are getting on beautifully."

"So do I—going at it hard. Perhaps they will put us in the Royal Academy next year."

"Or the Luxembourg."

"Mustn't be too ambitious—a woman always is, though."

Another half-hour.

"I'm tired of industry," he said, and, putting away his colours, stood for a few minutes looking over her shoulder till she, too, gave up work. Then she turned round on her stool and waited as if for him to speak. He took it as a sign, and gathered courage. "I wish you would come back to England." But she shook her head.

"Is it quite impossible?"

"Quite, quite indeed; and, Jim,"—she added almost entreatingly,—“I cannot go back to England with you; don't let the Mummy ask me any more—”

"We would try to make you happy, Kathy," and he sat down on the ground by her camp-stool.

"I can't"—something warned her that the con-

versation was becoming dangerous; "I want to spend the winter in Italy."

"And alone?" She nodded her head, and looked away into the distance they had been sketching. "But, Katherine." He put his hand on hers. She started and drew it away. "Don't be angry," he said in a low voice, as she tried to get up. "I was only going to say that it is rather odd, you know, for a girl to be abroad alone, staying about by herself all the winter."

"Mrs. Carter, at the hotel, is all alone; she is not much older than I am."

"She is a married woman. Besides, we want you with us." She tried with a laugh to cover her embarrassment.

"I can take care of myself. Come, let us walk on. Alice said you were very straitlaced;—but I won't do anything dreadful even though I am alone," she said, as they gathered up their things. There was not a soul within sight or sound; even the hotel, a little below them, was hidden by the fir trees: they could see little but the sky-line of the mountain range. They walked on for a few minutes before he answered—

"I know that. I don't believe you would know how. Will you be glad when we are gone?"

"Glad! Why should I be that, when this is the happiest time of all my life?" She turned away so that he could not see her face.

"And of mine," he said, and put his arm on her shoulder and drew her a little way towards him. "Yes, just for one minute," he went on in a tone that would not be resisted. "Look here, we might lean against

this rock, if you do not want to lean against me—and the happiest time of my life too, Kathy. I am so afraid to speak to you, my darling, you have not known me very long, and perhaps you think I am just a ruffian; but I love you and want you to stay with me, and to belong to us for ever.” She trembled with fright, but she could not keep the tumultuous happiness in her heart out of her eyes, and he saw it there. “I want you to come back with the Mummy and me, my darling. She loves you, and I love you, my sweetest—I love you better than anyone I ever saw.” She tried to turn away again, but perhaps she managed badly, for somehow her head went on his shoulder, and he stooped and kissed her hair, and she forgot everything but the joy of knowing that he loved her and held her in his arms. Only for a moment: then—she remembered.

“You mustn’t—you mustn’t!”

“Yes, I must,” he whispered back, for he felt that she loved him, and the rest was only a matter of persuasion. “I must, because I love you, and want to keep you all my life. Do you think you could endure it, Kathy?” and he tried to raise her face to his. “Could you marry me and go back with me to India?”

“Oh, no, no!” she said, and wrenched herself away. “I can never marry anybody as long as I live!” He looked at her with astonishment; she had seemed passive a moment before, and it was impossible that he could have mistaken the expression in her eyes.

“I thought you cared for me.”

“I do!” she exclaimed passionately, “I do care; it isn’t that”—

"And you know that I love you," he said, leaning forward reassured, but she put out her hand to keep him off.

"No, no!" she cried in alarm; "you mustn't do that—but yes, I know you love me—I felt it just now."

"Then why won't you marry me? Is there any-one else?" She hesitated and longed to tell him the truth. But had not Alice made that unfortunate statement about the Alfords? And had she not herself heard what the Mummy had said about Mrs. Simpson, the woman who had left her husband? And did not everyone, so far as she knew, agree in thinking that there was but one thing to do with a runaway wife, and that was to send her back to her husband? Besides, she could not bear to confess that she, who had let him kiss her just now, and had been content and happy to rest her head against him, was married. He would think her wicked, and despise her. She felt wicked, and despised herself, for, as she stood facing him on the lonely pathway, there rushed back with terrible distinctness the remembrance of her wedding-day and those awful words she had said standing up in church beside Mr. Belcher; she remembered her wedding ring, and signing her name in the vestry, and going away—that terrible going away with Mr. Belcher to Windermere. She thought of Mrs. Oswell, the first person who had ever said "Mrs. Belcher" aloud to her. She could see in imagination the envelopes of the few letters that had come directed to her in her married name, especially the first ones that Mr. Belcher had opened. Everything seemed to stare her in the face as if aghast at what she had done, and was doing, and

for the first time she felt wicked and deceitful, though she knew that she was neither. He stood looking at her doubtfully, wondering what to do.

"Won't you speak to me, my darling," he said at last. "Is there anyone else who cares for you?"

"Anyone else who cares for me!" she repeated. "No, no one in the world, and I have cared for no one else." The "else" sent a flash of joy through him. "For no one else," she said again, as though she knew what it was to him, "in my whole life—nor ever shall."

"Then, my sweet, it is all right," he said, in the happy voice she loved, and that this last hour had seemed to be waking up a new life in her, that stirred her heart and soul. He tried to reach her face. He longed to clasp her in his arms and to kiss her again and again.

"You mustn't," she cried in terror, "you mustn't, indeed!"

"But you said you cared for me. You meant it, didn't you?"

"I love you more than any words can say," she answered. "I think there was never, never anyone like you," but she covered her face and shuddered.

"And some day you will marry me, my darling. I will wait for you if you wish it. Has it been too sudden, does it seem too great a change in your life? I will wait for you as long as you like, if you will have it so."

"No, I can't," she answered firmly, and still keeping him at bay. "I am never going to marry anyone as long as I live."

"Dear goose," he said tenderly, "you are going to marry me."

"No!" she cried, and looked at him with a hunted look that puzzled him sorely. "I can't, Jim. I am not going to marry you—I can never marry anybody."

"And you don't care for anyone else," he said, "and no one cares for you, and never did?"

"Never—never," she said, and clasped her hands and stood with her head bowed. He looked at her curiously, up and down, almost as if he wondered whether she were in her senses.

"Kathy," he said gravely, "I love you, and you say you love me. I want you to be my wife, darling. Won't you?"

"I cannot," she said very gently, but with a determination he could hardly believe; "but I love you," she pleaded.

"I don't understand you," he answered coldly. "You are not treating me fairly. Come, let us go." And they walked back to the hotel in silence.

CHAPTER XVII.

SHE stopped by the hotel door. "Would you mind," she asked gently, "not telling the Mummy just yet? It has been so strange and sudden. I don't think I could face her if you did. Let it be till this evening." For answer he nodded his head and lagged behind.

She went up to her own room—that room in which she had thought over many things and lived a lifetime while she looked out at the plains of Lombardy—and shut the door, and put her hand to her head, and tried to realise whether she was awake or dreaming. So many conflicting emotions beset her that her brain was in a whirl; and yet, almost against her will, her poor human heart beat for joy. For did not Jim Alford love her best in the world, and want to marry her—to spend his whole life with her? Only the terrible mistake that had been made for her—she had not made it for herself—stood between her and that great happiness. But she could not dwell on the mistake now, for the intoxication of the moment rose above her knowledge of the impossibilities. Never before had she been loved till she knew Mrs. Alford; but this love—Jim's love—it made the world another place and life a sweet delirium.

Then she remembered his coldness, and was dismayed; perhaps he would refuse to be friends again—

the friends they had been. She did not think she could bear that. And yet—for she felt that she must look things in the face—suppose he did remain distant and angry? It would break her heart, she thought with the exaggeration of youth. She could be content knowing that he loved her and disguised his love with friendship, though they were a thousand miles apart, but not if he were changed towards her. But, of course, he would change towards her if she declared she loved him and yet refused to marry him. What could he think but that she did not care for him so much as for her liberty, or so much as he did for her—he who wanted her for his whole life? One possibility after another presented itself to her whirling brain. In the first moment of wild excitement she had supposed that he would forget his proposal after a little while, and go back to the old footing, and they would be closer, happier friends than ever, with the exquisite knowledge at their hearts that they loved each other. “But no, no!” she shook her head, and realised that they could never go back to it. They would remember that morning all their lives, and hunger for more than had before contented them. “And we might have been so happy. It was for people who love each other that marriage was made, not for cruel or worldly people to gain money or position by;” and she burst into passionate tears. “I ought to tell him! It would be fairer—it would be right—even though it kills me, he ought to know!” But her courage failed her as she said it. He would never understand how she, a girl who had travelled alone to Italy and was unafraid of the world, had been kept down and cowed in the old

Shooters' Hill days. He would never understand the insults that had brought about the crisis at Montague Place.

Then there was Mrs. Alford. She would have to know, and had she not said that nothing justified a woman in leaving her husband? She would send her back! Perhaps she would think it a duty to write to Mr. Belcher. Katherine's heart stood still at the thought. She felt that she would rather live the most lonely or miserable life that could be devised for her on this earth than go back to Mr. Belcher. She would infinitely rather die. She got up and stood by the window, looking out dismayed into space. The great joy of earth had come to her—the joy of being loved by the man to whom her heart was given, but it brought her only trouble and difficulty; she had to put it aside for the sake of a tie that was only an idea. All trace of her marriage to Mr. Belcher had vanished so completely, and he had been so little in her thoughts of late, that the remembrance of her life with him had become as the remembrance of a night-mare, and she could hardly realise it was anything else. She looked out of window for a moment almost beseechingly, as if asking the world she saw from it to give her counsel. Then the door opened, and Miss Bennett appeared. She was pale and haggard. Katherine saw it with a start, and chokingly pushed her own thoughts aside.

"Oh, Miss Bennett!" she said; "I meant to have gone to you this morning, but we went out early to make that sketch from the top. I fear we didn't get much done;" and she looked ruefully at the block she had thrown carelessly on the table; "but I will try and

finish it to-morrow. Sit here by the window, you look so very tired."

"I have had a pleasant surprise, and wanted to tell you. Never mind about the sketch. I daresay I should only give it away," Miss Bennett said, with her usual lack of graciousness. "I am going from here in a few days—in fact, as soon as I can get away;" and a smile broke over her face.

"Something has happened to you," Katherine said wonderingly—"something that pleases you?"

"Perhaps it will please you too, for you offered to lend me your money."

"I wish you had taken it."

Miss Bennett shook her head. "I couldn't take it from a girl. You may have little enough, for all I know. This morning I had a letter. Look!" She took a registered envelope from her pocket. It contained banknotes for a hundred pounds. On a sheet of paper that enclosed them were the words, *With best wishes*. Katherine understood directly—Jim had done it. She remembered the expression on his face the other night, when he said that it must be a bad thing to be dying and stranded; and his mother had often told her of his easy generosity. She counted up the days that had intervened—the days of bad weather—since that talk to which he had never afterwards alluded. There had been just time to write home and direct the money to be sent in this manner. "Yes, it is Jim," she said to herself, while the tears came into her eyes. "It is like you, and I am proud of you, and love you. Oh, you must never know how I have deceived you! I will go away at once." She almost

started at the idea—it would solve so many difficulties. Then she stooped and kissed Miss Bennett from sheer gratitude, for had not the sick woman given her the knowledge of this good deed?

“Have you any idea who sent it?” she asked, and put a pillow behind Miss Bennett’s shoulders, and longed in little services to her to give expression to the love that filled her heart for the one being to whom she dared not show it.

“None. It may be a gift, or the payment of a debt. I don’t know. I had just fifty pounds left in the world, and had written home for it. Now, perhaps, I shall have enough left, when my bill is paid, to last me till I die.”

Someone walked along the corridor outside, half hesitated, and went downstairs. Katherine felt certain that it was Jim; she knew his step.

“Oh, don’t talk of dying,” she said gently. “Life is sweet at its worst, and you may get well. Tell me where you are going.”

“To Italy. Perhaps I shall live through the winter. When I am much worse, my sister will come, but she will not be able to stay long.”

Katherine knew what she meant, and the planned meeting of life and death made her shudder.

“But where, precisely, are you going?” And are you going alone?”

“There is a woman I know—she has a little *pension* on the Italian Riviera—at Alassio, a little place that hardly anyone has heard of yet. She and I have known each other for years, and she does not talk. I want to be with someone who is silent.”

"But you can't go alone?"

"I must, and this money makes it possible."

"Let me take you!" Katherine exclaimed. "I am going from here; I want to go. Oh, do let me take you! I couldn't bear to think of you on your way alone."

"I thought you were going to marry Mrs. Alford's son?"

"No, that is impossible; and they are going home very soon. Let me take you to Alassio; I won't talk; I will be very silent. And I want to go to some little Italian place—that has been my intention, but it must be a place where there are no English at all. Perhaps I might find one near you; then I should see you sometimes in the winter."

"I should like to see you; you are a good girl, and mean well," Miss Bennett said, and Katherine heard her with infinite gratitude. "There is the Hotel Méditerranée half a mile out of Alassio, low down on the shore. It has an orange garden, and the mountains rise up beyond. It might do for you, and I have heard that it is cheap: women who are alone never have any money," she added, with grim sarcasm. "Or a mile farther on is Laigueglia. There are no English at all there, and very few Italians: only a cracked white marble church, and a few ruined houses, with desolate gardens."

"When will you be ready to go?"

Miss Bennett answered quickly—

"Directly—in a day or two—as soon as I have packed my things; they will not take long; there are only my two little boxes. But if you can't be ready so

soon, I will wait. After all, it doesn't matter," and her momentary excitement died away.

"I will tell you after lunch, or at tea-time, if that will do, when I can be ready." Katherine followed the direction of Miss Bennett's eyes, and saw Jim Alford taking the downward path towards Mendresio. "Perhaps he is going away to avoid me," she thought, catching her breath. "I will go when you like," she said, turning to Miss Bennett. "Hark! there is the luncheon-bell. Let us go down, I will take you," she cried eagerly.

Mrs. Alford was taking her place at table.

"Has Jim gone away?" Katherine asked.

"No, of course not—so suddenly," his mother answered, surprised at the question; "he has only gone out for a couple of hours because he wanted to be alone. He will be back by three o'clock; but he talks of going to Milan for a few days. I wish he would wait for me," she added. "This is quite a sudden freak."

"I will go first," Katherine thought.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"BUT I do not understand you, my dear Katherine," Mrs. Alford said, bewildered and a little offended. "I shall be very grieved if you go away, at anyrate, immediately, and so will Jim."

This was a couple of hours after lunch, while they sat together in the sitting-room that had gradually become homelike.

"It is not as if you were alone," she pleaded. "You have Jim now to take care of you, and you will like to have him all to yourself for his last few months of leave"—

"You may not see him again for years."

"I know," Katherine answered in a voice she could hardly keep steady; for though she faced this possibility in her own room, it was harder to bear when put into words. "I don't suppose," she went on, "I shall ever see him again after"—

"Tell me," Mrs. Alford said, trying to look into her face, "why you are going—is my boy nothing to you? I have been hoping that you were a great deal to each other."

Katherine hesitated for a moment, then answered simply, "I think there is no one like him in the world, but it can't make any difference. I can never go to England again while I live."

"Were you so unhappy there?"

"I was very miserable," she answered, and she thought, "Oh, if I could only tell her—if I could only tell her! But no—no. She would never forgive me, and she would send me back."

"Your uncle is in Australia?"

"It makes no difference." And then a sudden fear possessed her. "Mummy," she said, for lately she had quite dropped the more formal address, "I want you to promise me something: it is—not to tell anyone in England that you ever met me or anyone called by my name."

"My dear, what do you mean?"

"Only—if I were discovered I should die; that is why I cannot go back." Another moment, and she would have told everything, but Mrs. Alford's manner was stern. She looked at Katherine coldly.

"I think you might give me your confidence," she said.

"I cannot," Katherine answered, almost husky with emotion. "I have learned many things in this last year," she went on, "and one is, that people are judged not by the intention in their conduct, but by its effect."

"I do not understand you." Mrs. Alford's manner became almost formal.

"Oh, don't, don't!" Katherine cried. "Love me a little while longer, just a very little while. I am going away in two or three days! Only while I am here, so that the memory of it is not spoiled—won't you?" She took Mrs. Alford's half unwilling hands and leaned her face down on them. "I always told you that I was a waif; perhaps you had better forget

all about me when I go, as you would forget a waif who had gone on into the distance. Oh, here is Jim! Jim," she said excitedly, "she is angry with me," and she put her arms round the old lady's neck and kissed her, "this dear Mummy, who has been so kind to me, kinder than anyone else in the wide world, and given me more happiness than I ever knew in all my life before. I have not done any harm, I have not indeed—you needn't look so coldly at me. Jim," she said, turning to him quickly, "I want to talk to you all by myself. I may, may I not, dear Mummy? Shall we go to the farm once more, you and I, and get the cream for tea? They will want their tea, you know, Jim, and we shan't be able to get it again, for I am going away"—

"Going away?"

"Yes; with Miss Bennett. I will tell you on the way to the farm. Oh, do let us go!" she pleaded, for she fancied that he hesitated; "just for a last, last time along the little pathway. I will get my hat at once." She put her cheek against the old lady's for a moment, then fled along the corridor.

"Jim," Mrs. Alford said to her son, "I think I know that poor child's secret: the ogre ill-treated her, and she ran away."

"Well, but he is safe in Australia now."

"Perhaps she dreads his coming back. I wish she would marry you, dear; you could take her back to India. Why don't you ask her if you are really fond of her? No matter what she has done, I am convinced she is as good as gold."

"I'll try what I can do this afternoon," he answered

slowly, for he did not want to tell her about the morning, after his promise to be silent.

"I am ready, I am quite ready," Katherine said, appearing at the doorway. He crossed over to her quickly, and they set off together, down the stairs, and out of the hotel, and towards the farm. "You are angry, I know you are angry," she said, still speaking breathlessly: "you are both changing to me at the same moment."

"Changing?" he said; "when only this morning I told you how much I loved you!" She saw the expression on his face, and her eyes filled with tears.

"And I love you, Jim dear," she said. "Only, indeed, you mustn't ask me to marry you."

He shook his head. "You are not treating me fairly, Kathy," and though he said it tenderly, she knew by his tone that he meant it.

"But can't you feel that I love you, can't you hear it in my voice, don't you know it?" she said desperately.

"I do," he said; "and that makes it all the more strange."

"Doesn't it satisfy you, as the knowledge of your love shall satisfy me? Why must it be marriage or nothing at all?" and she drew closer to him, for they were on the lonely pathway going towards the farm. "Why can't we be friends—very dear friends—all our lives? We might be brother and sister to each other—you never had a sister of your very own"—

"People cannot be brothers and sisters, my child, when they are in love with each other."

"Oh, but they can; and they can be friends. Think

how much better it would be than nothing—nothing. If we can't marry,—and we can't, for I don't want to be married, and can't be, and it is better to be free,—we might be friends." She was almost incoherent with nervousness. "Very dear friends—we could always be that—and we could write to each other very often, and tell each other everything we did, and thought, and read, and be everything in the world that two people parted by long miles can be."

"All this is nonsense, Kathy. You don't know what you are talking about. What you say may be all very well for two friends who desire to be nothing more; but you and I love each other—at least I know that I love you with all my heart," he said simply. "I want you to come to me, to share my life, to be with me always. And if you loved me, you would want it too."

They stopped and sat down on the little bank beside the pathway.

"I do want it too," she said earnestly. "But I cannot marry you, and—I think," she added, bursting into passionate tears, "that marriage is the most hateful and terrible thing in the world!"

"Well, that is rather an odd thing to hear the woman you love say."

"I mean the ceremony that binds people so that they can never get away, no matter how much they hate each other, nor how miserable they are together. If you love each other and promise to be faithful all your lives"—she stood up in her excitement and looked at him—"promise with your whole heart and soul, oughtn't that to bind you? And yet it doesn't. People

talk of making their vows before God—doesn't God hear you when you are alone?"

"Katherine," he said, staring at her with astonishment, "I don't understand this outburst. What on earth has made you trouble yourself about the marriage ceremony?"

"Because it is so terrible, so cruel," she said. "It binds people together who want to be separate, and fetters them when they want to be free. Jim," she went on in a whisper, while a flush dyed her face, "is not this morning—should not the memory of it be enough to satisfy us? We can never get away from it or forget it as long as we live. Don't you think God heard us just as much saying the things we did mean there on the mountain as He would have heard two people in a church saying the things they did not mean? And which do you think would be marriage in His eyes?"

"I do not understand you," he answered. "The marriage ceremony may be only the public record of the vows that people have made each other in private; but it was made by the strong for the protection of the weak, and the strong must uphold it. I have no sympathy with fads about marriage nor with any crusade against those things that experience has taught us to be best for the majority. Come, let us go." He turned towards the farm; and with a sinking heart and burning face she followed him.

The bottle was filled for the afternoon tea. They refused the little bowls of cream the milkmaid offered them, and turned on their way homeward in silence.

"It is the oddest thing in the world," he thought,

"that she should go off her head about the marriage ceremony. Some women are rather too eager for it. Perhaps the Ogre wasn't happy in his domestic relations, and had an occasional fight with his good lady, though I never heard that he had one." Katherine's talk had repelled him. He liked a woman who revered forms and ceremonies; he even liked her to be a little superstitious. "What put all that stuff about marriage into your little head?" he asked. "You couldn't have spoken more vehemently if you had had a drunken husband who beat you every Saturday night."

"Ah," she said eagerly, "now you have touched it. Suppose a woman has a drunken husband who beats her on Saturday nights—a man she doesn't love and has never loved, but has married for some other reason; or if a man has a bad and wicked woman for a wife—not a woman he has once loved, and so for the sake of that remembrance is willing to bear with,—are they to stay together and be miserable all their lives?"

"Yes, I think so," he answered slowly. "It is hard lines, of course, but if they had not cared for each other they should not have married"—

"Yes, yes, I agree to that"—

"But having done so, no matter for what reason, I think they are bound to pay the penalty if it is in any way possible—now and then of course it isn't. I neither believe in easy marriage nor in easy divorce myself"—

"Oh no," she said; "marriage should be made very difficult, so that people have time to think and think."

"And the more binding, the more sacred it is made

the better—the respect for it will increase. Of course some marriages that look all right on the outside are pretty bad on the inside, but a sensible man or woman, I expect, makes the best of it. Just as the soldier is often sacrificed for the battle, so sometimes must the everyday individual be sacrificed for the sake of the institution that has been found to work best for the majority.”

“But only men are soldiers.”

“Well, but we all have a certain amount of grinning and bearing to do, and of saying nothing about it if we are wise, in every concern in life. I feel rather ashamed of preaching so much,” he said awkwardly. “I never went through such a facing before. I think I shall go back and stump the country on the subject;” he laughed at the idea. “I say, Kathie dear, but what does all this mean? There’s something behind it. Have you been talking with some of those pleasant ladies who have told us that men are very wicked, and marriage a mistake, or that it would be an infinitely finer thing without a ceremony. Has Miss Bennett matrimonial views of her own and been holding forth on them?”

“No,” she laughed, rejoicing to get on the easy footing again; “she has done nothing of the sort, and I don’t even know what you mean. All the men and women that I have seen or known—with one exception,” she faltered, but he was wholly unsuspecting—“have been very dear and good. They seem to be just as good as each other, only it is nicer,” she added, looking up with the quick smile he loved, “when the men are wiser and stronger; it makes them better able to

take care of the women. I can't think of anything better in the world than being taken care of by anyone—the man," she added shyly, "you love best in the world."

"And you don't know ten thousand people who have all married miserably?" he asked merrily, for it seemed as if things were coming round to the point he wished.

"No," she said, with a little sorry laugh; "I knew of one miserable marriage, but the others"—and she thought of the Oswells and of George and Alice Alford—"have been perfectly happy. In England I used to walk about alone and look at the people two and two, always a man and a woman, and think how glad they seemed to be because they were together."

"As we will be, my sweet, when we are married," he said, and made a sudden snatch as if to kiss her.

"Oh no," she cried vehemently; "never as long as we live!"

"I do not understand you," he was almost indignant. "Do you really mean to say that it can never be—never?"

"Yes, I mean it," and her voice was positive. "But cannot we be friends?"

"No, we cannot," he answered, getting angry. "That means, at worst, what I do not even choose to mention to you"—

"But at best?"

"Something that may be satisfactory for one, but never is for two. I shall go away to-morrow," he said curtly, and they walked on in silence.

"I should like to be alone," she said, as they entered

the hotel, "and will not come in to dinner to-night, but I will see you both afterwards in the sitting-room; perhaps there will be a fire." She shivered as she went into her room once more, for she had only made him love her less, and widened the distance between them. "It is no good," she thought bitterly; "my life is my own; I have to suffer all its pain, and yet I cannot fashion it as I like. I might as well try to shape water with my hands. A little life like mine, too. The great laws are our masters, I suppose, and avenge themselves somehow on those who dare to tamper with them. Only I have been so happy," she went on, a little gratitude coming into her eyes, "and I don't care—I don't care what comes of it. I have had a flash of summer right across my life. I should never have known it if I had not come here or if I had told them. Oh, think, think," she exclaimed, clasping her hands, "what it would have been to have lived all my life and to have loved no one! I ought to be very thankful for even this anguish"—A sudden idea smote her as if it had come from heaven. "And I will make it a thank-offering," she said slowly,— "a thank-offering that shall try me sorely and cost me much, but I will do it as a proof of the love I bear him." She sat down for half an hour and considered: a great resolution took possession of her, and she determined that nothing should tempt her to go from it.

Presently she got up and made some tea for Miss Bennett.

"Miss Kerr," the sick woman said, "these people downstairs are very inattentive, though I have paid their bill. I shall leave to-morrow morning; I have ordered the chair to carry me down and the mule for my

baggage. If you really wish to come with me, I would wait for you a day or two at Mendresio?"

It was an unexpected stroke of good fortune. "But I will go with you to-morrow," she exclaimed, "as early as you like, and gladly."

CHAPTER XIX.

MRS. ALFORD was alone when Katherine went to her after dinner. Jim had gone for a stroll by himself; it was a sign of the changed state of things that he had done so.

"He will be back directly," his mother said apologetically, and warmed her hands in silence. Katherine crouched on a low stool at her feet, and watched the crackling wood. Presently she looked up.

"Mummy," she said, "while you were at dinner I put all your things tidy, and your tea-basket is safe in your room. Is there anything else I can do for you this evening? To-morrow I am going away with Miss Bennett." She stroked the old lady's hand as if to soften the news of her sudden departure.

"To-morrow?"

"Yes, to-morrow," she repeated sadly. "There is no one else to take care of her. She needs me; you have Jim."

"He needs you too. I don't know what there is in your heart, my dear, except that it is something you are keeping from me. I think you might have trusted me. I have been very fond of you."

"And I of you, dear Mummy."

"Then why should you go? You said you were fond of Jim; I hoped you were, but he has told me

about this afternoon. He never loved anyone else in his life—I thought you cared for him.”

“I do,” she whispered. “I love him with all my heart, and think there is no one like him in the world. The mere sound of his step makes my heart beat, and to see him is life and happiness to me.” The old lady was appeased.

“Then why won’t you marry him, my darling?” she said, taking Katherine in her arms.

“I can’t,” she whispered, and crouched down on her stool again and looked into the fire.

Then Jim entered, and Mrs. Alford turned to him quickly, longing to bring about an acute crisis of some sort. “Katherine is going away to-morrow,” she said, “she and Miss Bennett together.”

“To-morrow!”

“Yes, to-morrow. I want to say good-bye to-night, so waited till you came,” Katherine said unflinchingly. Then she turned to his mother, “You have been very kind to me, Mummy. I can’t thank you now, but I will in silence all my life.” She had risen from her stool and stood looking at them both.

Mrs. Alford took her hands and held them. “Why won’t you stay,” she said, “and why can’t you make my son happy?” Then Katherine stooped and kissed her, and drew her hands away and crossed to the door, which was shut. She had not spoken to Jim, who waited awkwardly by the table in the middle of the room, but she gave him a quick look, and as she did so, he saw that her face was pale, and her eyes had the scared look in them again.

“I didn’t mean my mother to say that to you,” he

said, "or that you should be troubled again in any way. Say good-bye to me, my dear, and God bless you." He went towards her and held out his hand. She motioned him back, and stood half hesitating, with her back to the door, and faced them both.

"Wait," she said, evidently speaking with difficulty; "I want to tell you—before I go, though you will never care for me again; but I made up my mind this afternoon when we came back from the farm that you should know. It is better than anything else—I make it my thank-offering for the happiness of the past months." She spoke hurriedly, as if she were afraid lest her courage should fail before she finished. "It is not because I don't want to stay with you that I am going, or because—or because I don't love Jim. He is more than anyone in the world to me." He made a step forward, but she put up her hands as if to keep him back. "I am going away because I—I am married to someone else."

"You are married?" Mrs. Alford exclaimed, while Jim looked at her as if he thought she had gone mad.

"Yes, I am married," she said, with a gasp of relief at having brought it out at last. "I was made to marry, but Uncle Robert did it for the very best. I know he did," she added gently. "He thought that every woman ought to be married. I had no relations, and he was afraid of leaving me alone in the world. I know he did it for the best," she repeated; "he meant to be kind; but I was miserable, for I didn't love him—I never did for a single moment. But I was powerless and helpless, and had been brought up to think that women were obliged to do as men told them. It seems

so weak and foolish to me now, for I have realised that we have all to live our own lives and can choose the great things in them for ourselves."

"But whom did you marry?" Mrs. Alford asked, bewildered.

"A friend of Uncle Robert's," Katherine answered, speaking in the manner of a hunted woman who had been brought to bay at last. "I had known him since I was a little girl. He was a great deal older than I—eighteen years, I think—and I didn't want to marry him, and told him so."

"Was he so much in love with you?" Jim asked.

"No," she answered sadly, shaking her head. It would be ungenerous, she thought, as Mr. Belcher was not there to defend himself, to explain wholly how cruel he had been—besides, her pride would not let her confess his blows. But Jim, at anyrate, divined that she was not telling them the worst. "No, he was not in love with me, but he knew that Uncle Robert wished to see me married—and he knew I should have Uncle Robert's money. He married me for that. I had no will of my own in anything, and no one to consult—no mother or sisters or friends, no one in the world except Uncle Robert, who had had a great trouble about his son. It made him very unhappy, and he grew silent and morose, and very stern, so that he hardly took any notice of me." She said it gently, as if to soften her words. "There was no one else except Susan, who said that men were the stronger race, and women must obey them. Oh, you can't understand, you can't indeed," she cried, clasping her hands, and looking up at Jim. "I could not help myself in any

way; I felt like a prisoner who was bound and had been born bound. It never even occurred to me to make a desperate struggle for freedom. I made a little feeble one, but it was useless."

"But when were you married?" Mrs. Alford asked, for Katherine's story sounded impossible. "You were so very young!"

"I was eighteen—it was the most dreadful day of my life—and that is what I meant," she went on, turning to Jim, "about the marriage ceremony. Why should words I did not mean, or say willingly, bind me? And why should he be able, without offence to any law at all, to marry me, not because he wanted me, but because he wanted Uncle Robert's money? There is something very wrong somewhere that such a thing should be possible," she said passionately. "It ought to be the bitterest sin, the most terrible disgrace, to marry for any reason on earth except because you want to spend your whole lives together."

"That is the only reason honest men—or women either—do marry," Jim exclaimed, stunned by Katherine's revelation.

"I have thought about it so much," she went on vehemently, as if she had not heard him, "hour after hour as I sat in my room looking across the plains of Lombardy. People who would be afraid to cheat or commit crimes for which they would be put in prison will take a false oath in a church, and say things they do not dream of meaning, and never seem to have it on their conscience. Is it because they think God will not tell their fellow-men, or does not hear them, or

because they think that truth and honour have little to do with marriage?"

"Katherine!" Mrs. Alford exclaimed, looking at her with astonishment.

"Yes, Mummy," the girl continued breathlessly. "I have thought and thought till I have been nearly mad. People ought to hesitate and think a great deal—unless they love each other so much that there can be no doubt at all about it—before they vow their whole lives to each other. Even if they are not desperately in love—perhaps some people cannot be—they ought to like each other best in the world and want to be together. And the ceremony should be the most sacred thing on earth—the most binding and the most blessed—and nothing should undo it. But now, marriage, on which one's whole happiness depends, is a careless, easy thing, done for money, or from fear, or because of a sudden fancy, as if it lasted a month instead of a lifetime; and it is a mere chance whether it makes for joy or sorrow—just a toss-up."

"But all marriages are not as you say," Mrs. Alford said coldly, and bewildered.

"No, dear Mummy, they are not, but many are; and even one in a town should be a disgrace—as murder is. It is worse than murder, for it lasts longer. Mr. Belcher married me because he wanted Uncle Robert's money, not because he loved me; and I married him because I was helpless and afraid of Uncle Robert; and I was young—a mere schoolgirl—and no companion for him, and he was none for me. We were just two strangers living in the same house. I was in his way, as a stranger is; he resented it when he saw me,

and lived his own life, so far as he could, without me."

"Why didn't you try to love him? He was your husband."

"I did, I did!" she said in a despairing tone, "but it was useless. I can't explain what life was with him. Perhaps it was all my fault—only I know this, that I was the most miserable girl in the wide world. One day," she went on quickly, "he told me he was going away for a week. He had been very cruel"—

"Cruel?" repeated Jim in a low voice.

"Yes," answered Katherine; "and I was nearly mad and hated him—I never did anything else but hate him. When he had gone—Uncle Robert had started for Australia—I ran away. Yes, I did, Mummy. Uncle Robert gave me some money before he went to Australia, and Mrs. Barrett left me some, and I ran away. That was how you found me on board ship. Alice never guessed I was married. I had thrown my wedding-ring into the sea"—

"You should have told me," Mrs. Alford said.

"I couldn't. I was afraid. I have thought sometimes," she went on, for she reproached herself concerning Mr. Belcher now that she had put his conduct into words, "that he meant to be kinder after we were married; but he was so much older, and I was such a schoolgirl, and he knew that I did not love him, for I had told him so, and gradually he learned to hate me because he couldn't get rid of me. That was what I meant to-day, Jim," she said, turning to him again. "I don't mean to scoff at marriage, but I never felt that

I was married to Mr. Belcher at all, and I don't now, only that I was his prisoner."

"You told me that you loved my son," Mrs. Alford said.

"Yes, dear Mummy, and I do," she answered in a low, sweet voice. "I love him with all my heart, and shall as long as I live—but I would not say it if I ever meant to see him again after to-night. I thought we could be friends, but I see now he is right in saying that it is impossible. You must not think," she added, as Mrs. Alford made a gesture of indignation, "that I mean any harm, for I think the greatest insult to love is to deface it with wickedness. And Jim was quite right to-day when he said we were all bound to respect those laws that were found to work best for mankind, that each individual must abide by them, no matter how hard they are; just as a soldier must die in battle for the sake of his country. I have expressed it all so badly, but I have thought about it day and night."

"My dear," said Mrs. Alford solemnly, "you must let your husband know your whereabouts."

Poor Katherine's heart called out dumbly, "Oh, I knew, I knew she would say it!" But she answered firmly, "No, I cannot."

"No, of course she can't," said Jim indignantly, and then he turned to Katherine. "My sweet," he said, "everything is, and must be, at an end between us in one way, of course; but I shall love you as long as I live, and we will try to be friends—or brother and sister," he added desperately. "But it is such a frightful puzzle, such a hole for you to be in, my poor darling."

"Talk it all over with the Mummy, Jim dear, and when you have thought it out, perhaps you or she will write to me."

"But I shall see you to-morrow?"

"Yes—perhaps," she said, as if her strength had come to an end, and she could bear things no longer, "but let me go now—in the morning it may be different." Before they knew what she was going to do, she had opened the door and vanished from their sight.

CHAPTER XX.

MORE than two months had passed since Katherine and Miss Bennett left Monte Generoso and journeyed along the Corniche road from Genoa to the little place at which they were to winter.

Alassio is half-way between Savona and San Remo. Inside the town gates are a couple of narrow streets,—worn into ruts like the streets of Pompeii, and hardly wide enough to let two well-loaded donkeys pass each other comfortably,—a piazza, a few primitive shops, and a couple of hotels that have seen better days. Beyond the east gate at one end are two or three fairly new hotels, the old picturesque church with its square towers, a few villas, and, a little way above them, the Protestant church, built by a handful of devout English. Beyond the west gate, towards Laigueglia, at the other end, there is little that belongs to Alassio. Dotted about on the mountain sides at irregular intervals are more villas, and here and there a shrine or ruined chapel. In and out the olive woods towards Albenga, the next town to Alassio on the eastern side, winds a narrow Roman road, along which Hannibal is said to have led his followers into Southern Italy.

But though Alassio is a pleasant enough place to the idler or the invalid, or to the romantic in search of the picturesque, it has no attractions for the frivolous

and fashionable. When Katherine and Miss Bennett journeyed to it, a few years ago, it was known to but few English folk, and they kept its beauty to themselves. It is on one side of a bay, as if it had dropped there gracefully and quite by accident; and a little way off—a mile or two, perhaps—is the village of Laigueglia, which might be Alassio's only child keeping respectfully at a distance from its parent. These two have the bay to themselves, and all along the shore are really fine sands, on which the children seek for Venus's slippers, and play among the boats and the brown sails and fishing-nets hung out to dry. Close behind, in a grand semicircle, are the mountains; there is no plain between them and the sea, save the sands and as much ground as is necessary for the little town to stand upon, and there is no visible break in their chain. Besides the sand, and the sea and the mountains, there are the olive woods and the maidenhair valley, and the Banksia roses, and the red berries of the sarsaparilla, and the acacia carubas, which are especially fine, and the palms and the pepper trees and the oranges that grow thick as apples in Devonshire, and the lemons thriving so well that five millions of them are gathered every year in the district. And there are bits of colour and patches of light, and bells that ring by fits and starts, and clocks that strike at odd moments, and a few well-to-do Italians, and many peasant folk, pleasant to talk with and picturesque to look at—all these, with the sunshine everywhere, make up the beauty of Alassio.

At the end towards Albenga, Miss Crockett kept a little *pension* in a villa that looked like a Swiss chalet. It was almost the last house in Alassio, and had a

garden full of orange trees and pepper trees, and geraniums that grew half as high as a man. Behind were the sands and the sea, and in front was a high road. On the other side of the road was a mountain covered with olive woods, and crowned by a ruined church that had a history about a princess who had built it as a thank-offering for having married her lowly-born lover. To the right stretched the white Corniche road, on its way to Albenga and the towns beyond; to the left it went past the villas and the church and the Grand Hotel, and the turning to the station, on to the town gates, through the town and out by the gates, at the other end, past an hotel built low down on the water's edge, and on, beside the railway line and the yellow sands and the sea, to Laigueglia.

Miss Bennett was staying at Miss Crockett's *pension*. The two women had known and disliked each other all their lives. They had both been governesses. Miss Bennett had broken down from ill health. Miss Crockett had done the same years before, but she was better, and had been helped by some old pupils to start the *pension* by which she managed to make a living. She was never sure of filling all her rooms, so that she was glad to take Miss Bennett even at a moderate price, and Miss Bennett thought it was better to be with her than with a stranger. She had never pretended to like Miss Crockett, nor to hold with her methods of teaching, so she knew that too much civility would not be expected of her. Thus it was they came together with a certain amount of congratulation, but with little sympathy on either side. Miss Bennett's strength seemed to be vanishing with the year: she gave more trouble than

the other boarders, but by way of compensation she ate less. In spite of her weakness, the soft Italian air was doing her good and putting her into a friendly humour with the world—though not with its people—before she said good-bye.

The room she occupied was a front one facing the roadway and the mountain; for those that faced the sea at the back were dearer and beyond her means; she could see the trains flashing among the olive woods at the foot of the mountain when she sat at the window—the train from the Italian frontier at Ventimiglia going on to Genoa, and the train from Genoa going back to the frontier. The people in them were seeking health or pleasure; it was always the same story, just as it had been at Generoso. She used to look at them grudgingly, wondering who was left to work, and who sat still to sorrow, for the world about her seemed to be given up to leisure or to pleasure-taking. Well, it didn't matter. Soon she would be away from it all, and the world might go on as it pleased. She had enough money, Miss Crockett was not likely to overcharge or neglect her, and Katherine came to see her every day. She liked Katherine, liked her better lately since her face had grown white and thin and very sad. A grim satisfaction came into her eyes as she noticed it: the girl was being made to pay, she thought, as all people who lived in the world and dared to bid for happiness were made to pay at some time.

"Is there nothing more I can do—nothing, nothing else?" she would ask Miss Bennett before she left her till the morrow. And the answer was always the same.

"No, thank you; and it would be better to get used

to having nothing at all done for me. I don't want to be sorry to die."

"But we must all be that while the sun shines and the trees have leaves and there is a sky above our heads. Unless we are in the bitterest pain, any life is better than death," Katherine said one day.

"The next world may be better."

"I long for a share of happiness in this one."

"Ah," answered Miss Bennett, "we all do that; but some of us die of hunger. I think you shall go now," she added, "but I like to see you come in of a day. I can't think why you wouldn't stay here."

"I will if you wish it," Katherine answered. It was saying a good deal, and she knew it, but her heart ached so much for the dying woman that she would have done anything in the world to give her a moment's pleasure. It haunted her day and night, as a sort of refrain to her own life and its anxieties, that Miss Bennett was dying, that every day she was a little nearer to the end that was already well in sight. She had never beheld death, but now, instinctively, she recognised it in Miss Bennett's grey face and transparent hands, and the footsteps that lagged feebly one after the other, with a pause between, as though the grim shadow stooped and measured them.

Miss Bennett considered Katherine's question. "No," she answered; "I think you had better stay where you are. I know the people here now, and it breaks the day better when you come in the afternoon. You are a good girl. I often wonder why you didn't marry young Alford. Women should marry if they get the chance. It's a terrible thing when you grow old to

feel that you have missed the near relationships of life. People who have done that are only in the way. Besides, women grow spiteful as they grow old if they are not married, just as men grow obstinate and narrow if they are alone."

"But why should they?"

"I suppose each sex needs the other to leaven it. It is better to be with a disagreeable man than to grow disagreeable yourself; though I think," she added, "there is some satisfaction in that too. I always like to give back what I have received." She turned her uneasy head away and closed her eyes.

Katherine, seeing that she was comfortable, left the room softly, and went back to her own lodging at Laigueglia. She was the only Englishwoman in the village, which Miss Bennett had described well enough—a little quiet street, a white marble church cracked by earthquake, a railway station at which a train stopped once or twice a day, and a few decayed, deserted-looking houses, with gardens full of orange trees; that was all. She had persuaded a woman who kept a little shop to let her have a bedroom, and to provide her with the morning coffee and the midday meal; the rest she managed, with the help of a spirit-lamp, and some tea and biscuits, to arrange for herself.

And here she tried to face the problem of the future; but it was far more difficult than it had seemed on the day she went on board at Southampton. For Jim Alford had gathered in many things besides her love—her dreams, and longings, and strength to do, were all prisoners with it. She felt dazed and paralysed. She had money enough for a couple of years. She had

leisure to work, and infinite peace. The soft air of the place was exquisite. The sea, and the mountains, and the vegetation looked their most beautiful to her, but she beheld them with despair. She could not paint; the colours mixed themselves into a hopeless blurr, and did not even interest her. She could only wander about, living the hours at Generoso over and over again, and try vainly to measure out her thoughts by a rule of right and wrong. "It is a dreadful thing to be a woman," she said to herself one day, "unless she is loved and cared for—I have found that out. Nothing is any good without it. As for religion, it is only an organ accompaniment to human love that makes her happy, or a desperate makeshift for the lack of it. And work,—a woman must work for those she loves, or with them, if she is to find happiness in it. I suppose it all goes back to the beginning; Adam was made first, to face the world and work in it; and Eve was made next, to be with him and to find her happiness in him."

The days went by, soft, warm days, full of sunshine and beauty; and at one end of Alassio there was a woman waiting to die, and to and fro from Laigueglia, beyond the other end, a girl walked daily, who, having tasted life and found it sweet, waited and hungered for more, but saw no human chance of getting it.

CHAPTER XXI.

A WEEK later, at sunset time. Katherine was sitting on the beach half-way between Laigueglia and the Hôtel Méditerranée, of which Miss Bennett had told her. A lonely bit of road and shore, with not a dwelling or a living soul upon it on either side of her for half a mile. But the sea was still and blue, and behind the road were some olive trees, and above them rose the mountains with their beautiful outline, showing dim and deepest violet against the evening sky. She was miserable and restless, she felt as though some merciless but inevitable fate was slowly travelling towards her. The acuteness of the pain that followed her confession and departure from Generoso had gone, but with it had gone too the excitement that helped her to bear it. She felt as a nun who had been uplifted while first she made her sacrifice to God, and hidden her face in thankfulness even while her tears fell because of those she was leaving; but now in despair paced the cell to which she had condemned herself, longing till her poor human heart felt like to break for the sound of a voice she would never hear again. She looked towards Laigueglia. Once it had been a prosperous, happy little place. Now it was a handful of ruins and memories, and among them the orange trees bloomed, and a few stragglers, old and worn, waited till their turn came to

be buried in the sunshine. She wondered what the houses had looked like when they were first built hundreds of years ago, and whether the builders had been young. Oh yes, they had been young—young and vigorous—and some of them had loved each other and married and borne children who had grown up, and married in their turn and the story had been repeated—again and again—till it had worn itself out, as all things do at last. Only a handful of peasants and fisherfolk remained, with little life or energy among them, and stillness reigned in Laigueglia—a stillness that seemed born alike of the dead and the sunshine. She turned her head away and looked towards Alassio; half-way between her and the west gate was the hotel, a long, rambling building, with a beautiful orange garden for its chief attraction. Immediately behind the garden the mountains rose up high and suddenly towards the blue sky. Hardly anyone stayed at the hotel, and the few who did were generally Italians. A man and a woman were sitting among the orange trees when Katherine passed, but she had only seen them in the distance. They came out from among them now, walked round to the front of the hotel, and stopped as if they were watching the sunset. Katherine could see them fairly well in the clear air, though they were some distance off, and something made her think that they were English. But since the man was certainly not Mr. Belcher, whom she dreaded, nor Jim Alford, for whom she longed, she did not trouble about them; she stooped and idly stirred the sand with her fingers.

All sorts of desperate things she might have done presented themselves to her.

"I wish I had never told," she said, while the blue water surged up to her feet as if to listen. "I might have married him, and gone away to India, and been happy all my life and never discovered. It wasn't as if he had been going to live in England. Why didn't I think of it and dare it? I know I could have made him happy, and he would never, never have known. It would have done no one any harm; how can a deed that only makes people happy and does no one any harm be wrong? I can't understand it. But I know this, that I would live the rest of my life in prison darkness or bitterest pain for just one single year of happiness. I used to think at Generoso that to remember the days there and live them over in my thoughts would be enough; but it isn't. I want to see Jim and hear him, to walk beside him—and it is all over for ever and ever, and I have to live to the end of my life as best I can. If we had only been like those two people!" she thought, as she watched the strangers saunter back to the orange trees; "they look like Adam and Eve returning to the Garden of Eden. But I have to wander on and be alone always—that is my portion, and some day I shall be old and discontented, waiting for death like Miss Bennett, and have had nothing in life to satisfy me, and be hungry and longing still. Jim will marry somebody else in time—oh, to think of him married to someone else!—someone who has always been happy, and will be happier still when he marries her, and she goes to spend her whole life with him! I hope I may die before it comes to pass, though I want him to be happy."

She stood up and looked at the sea—it seemed full

of infinite wisdom and understanding. "How foolish I must seem to you!" she cried, holding out her arms towards it. "But I am so unhappy!" She turned away with a long sigh, and walked on towards Laigueglia, thinking of the Mummy's letter; for she had written to Mrs. Alford soon after leaving Generoso. There had been a fortnight's long waiting before the answer came, and when it did, though it was kind enough, it was firm in its opinion that she ought to go back to her husband, or to write to her uncle in Australia, asking him to arrange a separation that was legal:—"Or, if you like," the letter went on, "and have not courage to do it before, as I think you ought, come to me at the end of January when Jim has gone. I shall be at Chilworth, and if you like to tell your husband to meet you under my roof, I will do my best to help you to some arrangement with him." How merciless it seemed! she had no heart to answer it. Other reference to Jim, except that one about his going, there had been none; but the letter was dated from Milan, and Katherine divined that they were on their way back to England. More than a month had passed since it came, but she could not think of it calmly, and determined that when Miss Bennett was gone she would journey on to some other place that had no memory of the morning that brought it.

She could not go indoors yet, it was too early. An idea struck her. It was nearly dark. She would go back to Alassio, through the little town, out at the other end, and on to Santa Croce, and see the moon rise through a ruined doorway—all that was left of some old church or monastery—hidden among the woods

high up above Albenga. She looked in at the garden as she passed the hotel. The strangers rose from a seat among the orange trees and suddenly faced her. With a cry of fear she stopped, for one of them was Mrs. Oswell.

"Mrs. Belcher!" Mrs. Oswell darted from her husband's side through the little gateway and stopped in astonishment. Katherine stood spell-bound and helpless, her hands twisting nervously together as she vainly tried to speak. It was all over—she was discovered, and going to be taken back, a prisoner, to a judge who would be merciless. Then Mrs. Oswell, just as if she had divined her thoughts, put her arms round Katherine's neck and kissed her. "Don't be afraid," she said. "We have understood all about it, and we are not going to telegraph to Mr. Belcher; so don't look at us as if we were dragons."

"It is all right, Mrs. Belcher," Mr. Oswell said reassuringly. "We were very sorry for you, and knew that things must have been pretty bad to make you do it."

"Where is he?" Katherine asked in a whisper.

"In England, I suppose," Mrs. Oswell answered in a tone of distinct satisfaction. "Let that comfort you. But how did you get here? Everyone thought you were at the bottom of the sea," she added cheerfully; "your trunk turned up from the wreck of an American liner, and its owner was supposed to be drowned."

"Its owner?" Katherine said, dazed, "and my trunk? Oh, I remember! I gave it to a chamber-maid at Southampton."

"Well, Mr. Belcher wears a hatband for you, and if you leave him alone, I shouldn't be surprised if some fine day he marries again."

"Oh, let him!" Katherine cried, with a great throb of relief; "and don't tell him that you have found me. I was very miserable with him. Let him live his life as he will, and let me go my own way."

"Are you alone, dear?" Mrs. Oswell asked in a low voice.

"Alone?" Katherine repeated, not even understanding the question. "Why, yes. I met an old friend on board ship and made friends with her people,"—the colour came to her face swiftly,—"but they are not here. I am by myself at Laigueglia, and the only person I know is a poor woman dying at Alassio."

Mrs. Oswell put her arm through Katherine's. "Fred," she said to her husband, "let us take her into the hotel and make her dine with us; the bell will ring directly—she wants cheering up."

Almost before she was aware of it, they had carried their point, and Katherine found herself sitting with them in the *salle à manger* of the hotel. "And now, tell us what you have been doing with yourself all this time." Mrs. Oswell's manner had not improved, and her dress was a little vulgar, but her face was as kindly as ever.

"I have been journeying on in the world as I always longed to do," she said, with a rueful smile. "It is very beautiful, and the people in it have been very good to me; but I have known that an end must come. Oh, do tell me," she went on eagerly, unable even yet

to mention him by name, "if you have seen him. And what he said and whether he tried to find me?"

"We will tell you everything," Mrs. Oswell answered, "as soon as you have eaten some dinner. What a good thing it is this place is empty, so that we can talk in peace! Fred, do hurry the waiter. Oh, you have ordered some champagne—that was clever of you—it will do her good, even if it is bad. Let me see the brand—I declare we are lucky. No, my dear Katherine, I have not seen Mr. Belcher, but Fred has, two or three times. I have seen your aunt"—

"My aunt? I haven't one."

"Yes, you have," Mrs. Oswell answered triumphantly. "Your uncle went to Australia to look after his son's wife and two boys; and it seems that a Frenchwoman who lived in the same house in Gower Street insisted on going too."

"The artfulness of women is amazing," said Mr. Oswell.

"Only when they are French, dear Fred. Well, when they got to Melbourne, it turned out that the boys were alive and the mother was dead. So your uncle married the Frenchwoman, and they all came back together, and are living happily ever after."

"I can't imagine Uncle Robert married," Katherine said in amazement. "Mr. Belcher won't get his money."

"Serve him right."

"But how did you see her? You didn't know Uncle Robert."

"No; but Fred had met him at your house and I was miserable about you, so I boldly called on her, and told her freely my opinion of Mr. Belcher. She is a

nice woman, and had admired you when you went to see your uncle. I am quite sure that she will be a friend to you."

"And who told you that I had run away?"

"I went to see you. Gibson said you had gone to Bridgwater, and gave me the address, so I wrote to you there, and the letter was returned to your house. I believe that first set up your husband's suspicions on his return. He was in a great rage, and persisted in believing that a woman at Bridgwater"—

"Oh, poor Susan"—

"Was hiding you. He felt certain that you were there, for you had been traced to Paddington. A month later there was a sensational wreck, and among the things cast up was the box with your name"—

"Susan thought it would look nice, and had it painted on when I was married."

"So Mr. Belcher concluded that you were drowned; and," she added, with the occasional want of tact which had always distinguished her, "I think he has quite done mourning for you by this time."

"It sets me free," Katherine said, with a long sigh of satisfaction; "he shall never know that I am alive."

"Well, but—I don't think that would be quite fair," Mr. Oswell said. "Suppose some day he married again—you would have led him into bigamy. It is rather an unpleasant fix, I know," he went on, looking at her with the kind eyes that she remembered at Windermere, "but it is best to play fair. You and Bee had better talk it over presently. And in spite of all things," he added, as he filled up her glass, "we will drink to your happiness, Mrs. Belcher."

"I never knew what happiness was—till this summer," she said.

Mrs. Oswell, watching her, thought sagely, "Unless I am very much mistaken, my dear, you have been pretty near the red light since you took to journeying about the world alone. A woman gravitates towards it by instinct when her home relations go wrong." Then she asked aloud—

"What made you come to this place, of all others?"

"It was your talk at Windermere," Katherine answered, looking at Mr. Oswell. "I never dreamed that you would come again; Mrs. Oswell said she didn't like the little Italian places."

"It's very odd," that lady said, "but, no matter how much I even hate them at first, I always come round to liking the things that Fred does. I positively longed to come abroad again, and made him bring me here, and now I am convinced that it is the loveliest place I ever saw. We are going away in the morning to Monte Carlo, but we mean to get home for Christmas—who would believe that it only wants a fortnight to it, in this lovely weather?"

"And you won't tell Mr. Belcher that you have seen me?" Katherine entreated.

"Of course not," Mr. Oswell said. "We should not dream of betraying you. But if you will forgive me for saying it, I think you ought to let him know that you are alive. It may be hard lines, but if there is a law, one ought—well, as a rule—to abide by it. We will take care of you," he said with determination, "and see

that he doesn't ill-treat you. Perhaps he would consent to a legal separation; then, at least, you would not go about dreading discovery; only it seems hard that you should have no future before you but that of a woman separated from her husband—which is never a very satisfactory one."

"I did not dream what was before when I married," Katherine said despairingly.

"People never do, my dear," Mrs. Oswell said; "but still, there you are. Suppose you and I go and sit quietly in the orange garden for a bit, while Fred has a little smoke? And presently we will take you back to Laigueglia. We start by the early train, so we shall not see you to-morrow. I can't think," she went on, as they walked down the pathway, "how I could be so unkind to Fred as not to enjoy Italy the last time he brought me."

"Are you as happy together as ever?" Katherine asked.

"Happier."

"Were you very much in love when you married?"

"We liked each other better than anyone else, and wanted to be together; but things didn't always go smoothly the first year. I have never owned that to anybody else," Mrs. Oswell added. "It was difficult for him, perhaps, to settle down with a woman always about him, to come home always to the same face and the same sort of talk, and to give up some of his bachelor habits,—though I am pretty easy-going,—and of course I am expensive, so that he has had to work harder, and his responsibilities are greater because of me."

"But he has had you to love him and sympathise

with him, and to care for everything that concerned him."

"And he has cared for everything that concerned me," Mrs. Oswell answered. "The advantages of his position, my dear, I leave for his contemplation. We have each put up with the other's shortcomings, and been thoroughly happy together. I certainly care for him more than for anyone else in the world—more and more as time goes on—as he does for me. But I suspect that if we had not displayed some tact and forbearance at times, especially in the beginning, we could have drifted apart."

"Mrs. Oswell," asked Katherine slowly, "are you saying this for me? Do you think I ought to go back to Mr. Belcher?"

"I think you ought to let him know that you are alive; and if you are to fight, why,—as Fred says,—fight fairly."

"He made me marry him, and he delighted in making me miserable."

"Made or not made, you did marry him; and if we were only punished for our crimes, and never for our blunders, many of us would get an easier time than we do."

"But it is so hard," Katherine said; "and why should he ever see me again? He told me that he even liked somebody else better—someone who was more amusing."

"That was kind! He probably said it to provoke you. I don't think he is the sort of man to like anybody much, unless it is himself; he is too intent on money, and on generally doing the best he can from a

worldly point of view. You know, too, if you will forgive my saying it, you didn't take him the right way. Unless I am a good deal mistaken, he is a man who likes laughter and bounce and spirit in a woman; likes her to fight him, laugh and make it up again—he wouldn't mind if he got the worst of it, though he wouldn't own up if he did. Gentleness and sweetness, as a rule, do best for the refined and highly-educated type, to which your good man does not belong. He's not a very manly sort of person either, you know, merely a bully who takes advantage of those who can't defend themselves, and feels a contempt for them into the bargain." Mrs. Oswell was certainly not making things better; but she could not forego the relief of speaking out her mind.

"I don't want to be a shrew because he is a bully; everything you say proves that we are better apart."

"Why not try going back to him and laughing at him. Consider life from his point of view. Suppose you go back, and things go on as they did before—he won't find it very pleasant to have a discontented wife to look at all his days. Suppose you separate, he'll go about with an invisible millstone round his neck, and you will become that beautiful invention of modern times—a woman with a husband, a past, and a grievance. Think of being that when you are forty—and even the cleverest woman is not only forty in time, but looks it."

"What do you want me to do?" Katherine asked slowly.

"Write to your uncle, and get him to try and im-

prove matters; and if they can't be improved, why, of course, you must arrange a separation. Have courage; we will stand by you, and I think your uncle's wife will be a good friend to you."

"Oh, Mrs. Oswell," Katherine burst out passionately, resting her head down on the back of the seat, "I cannot do it. It isn't only that I don't care for him—I hate him and shrink from him. He is horrible—horrible! even to think of him makes me shudder. There cannot be anything in the world so cruel as to be married to a man you hate; and it isn't only that I don't love him," she added desperately, "but that I love somebody else. You have been very kind to me, and so I tell you. I love somebody else with all my heart and soul, and think of him every minute of my life, and long to be with him, and every day away from him—and all my days must be spent away from him—is an ache and a sorrow. He is not here, and I shall never see him again."

"Thank God!" Mrs. Oswell said to herself; for a pleasant affection, or even a very strong one, she understood well enough; but an absorbing love, or an overmastering passion, that swept a man or woman's whole life before it, was to her mind chiefly a matter of the imagination, and therefore to be got over.

"In a little more than a month he will have started for India, and I shall never, never see him again," repeated poor Katherine wofully. "But he loved me, and he wanted to marry me. Oh, Mrs. Oswell, I should have been the happiest woman in the world!"

"Didn't he know that you were married?" Suddenly

Mrs. Oswell looked down at Katherine's hand. "Why, where is your wedding-ring?"

"I threw it into the sea," she answered, with a satisfaction she could not help. "No, he didn't know; he thought I was a girl."

"But does he know now?" Mrs. Oswell was a little shocked, easy-going though she was by nature.

"Yes, yes; he knows everything, and probably despises me, and thinks me even worse than you do, for he and his mother—they were together, and I stayed with them at Generoso—could not understand why I refused him, though I loved him, and made no secret of it, till I stood up one night and told them the truth. But I could not bring myself to tell them that Mr. Belcher had struck me. It seemed ungenerous. Besides, my pride would not let me confess it, it was so humiliating; and when I had finished, almost before they had had time to recover, I vanished from their sight, and the next morning I got up very early, and left a note for Miss Bennett—she was to be carried down in a chair from Generoso, and did not want me till she reached Mendresio. I started on foot at five in the morning. It was chilly and raining." She raised her face, and though it was almost quite dark,—they were sitting very near together,—Mrs. Oswell could see that her eyes were flashing and her cheeks and lips were burning.

"This girl is more beautiful than ever," she said to herself; "something has done her good. If that horrid Belcher could see her now, he would crawl at her feet. Perhaps he will, and if she gives him a scornful kick, he'll adore her."

"And I shivered and my teeth chattered with misery and cold," Katherine went on, with a little tragic smile at the last word—for what had the cold, or anything else, but the one thing in her heart, mattered on that grey morning? "But afterwards I saw the sun shining up on the mountains, and it helped me a little. I shall never forget that long walk down while I live—it was like walking down from heaven. Miss Bennett followed earlier than I expected, and we got away by the morning train, perhaps before they even found out that we had started. I wrote to Mrs. Alford from here, but her answer showed that she was angry, and Jim didn't send me a single word. All that is over, Mrs. Oswell, but I love him dearly, and could be happy with him, though we were beggars in the street, and he beat me every day. That is the whole difference. How could I go back to Mr. Belcher, and be a wife to him whom I never loved at all—never did anything but hate—while in my heart I am always with another man and belong to him?"

"Well," said Mrs. Oswell, with a long sigh, "it is a terrible corner, and I don't see what is to be done."

"Leave me alone," Katherine said simply, "and tell no one that you have seen me. You shall hear from me later—after poor Miss Bennett has gone, perhaps. Leave me alone—wait—wait till I have thought it all out for myself. I want to do what is right, but some things are not to be borne."

"There is no merit in doing right when it is easy; it is the difficulty that makes it virtue."

"And even then it is only duty. Oh, Mrs. Oswell,

I have come to the conclusion that morality is often the sorriest thing in the world. Still, I am not a foolish girl any longer. I am a woman who has suffered and thought, and loved and striven, and I want to do my best—my very, very best—but I must fight it out alone; I must be alone to work out my own salvation or the reverse. Remember, whichever it is, it will be mine, mine to bear, for ever and ever.” Mrs. Oswell looked at her puzzled; these strong emotions did not often come her way, and she did not know what to do with them.

“Don’t be so unhappy,” she said. “Things may turn out better than we imagine, and, of course, though it may seem rather hard now, it is a good thing that the other man is going to India, for, after all, we women are very human, my dear. I wish you would talk it out with Fred—there is nothing like a masculine head for leavening two feminine ones, and he liked you from the first. I feel sure it would do you good if you talked it over with him. Have a little chat with him alone; you will find it easier”—

“I can’t talk it over any more, dear Mrs. Oswell,” Katherine answered desperately. “Let me go back to Laigueglia. I am glad to have seen you both. You have been very good to me, and I know you will be, but let me be for a little while, and then I will write to you; and till then, promise not to say that you have seen me.”

“Yes, dear, I will—we both will.”

“Now let me go;” and she rose to her feet, as if she could bear the ordeal no longer.

"Are you in a *pension*?"

"No; I have a room over a little shop. I want to go back and sit in the dark and think it all out by myself."

They walked back with her almost in silence, along the bare white road, beside the sea. The village was dark and still, though it was hardly eight o'clock, for light is dear in Italy, and the little lamps, beside which the peasants sit on the long winter evenings, hardly do more than betray the shadows round them. The church at the end of the one street looked high and staring white; the sands and the dark sea beyond were plain enough, but they could make out nothing else. They stopped before the house in which Katherine lodged; the shop was closed, there was no sign or sound of life; but she pushed open the door at the side, and showed them that it had been left ajar in order to admit her. Mrs. Oswell looked curiously in at the narrow passage, but there was nothing to be seen. For one moment Katherine thought of asking her to enter and see the room that was now her home; but her courage failed, she wanted to be alone so much. She was aching to get up to it—the little whitewashed room with the coloured pictures round it, and the fantastic ceiling decorated in cheap Italian fashion—she wanted to throw open the window and look outwards towards the sea.

"Good-bye;" and she held out her hands. Mrs. Oswell kissed her on both cheeks.

"You must write to us," she said.

"After the New Year," Katherine answered, putting

her weary head down for one moment on the friendly shoulder; "I want to rest till then."

"It will be the best thing for you," Mr. Oswell said understandingly; "and be assured that we shall say nothing till you give us leave."

CHAPTER XXII.

SHE groped her way upstairs and pushed open the door. The room was faint with the scent of flowers gathered in the morning. She struck a match and looked round as if to be sure that the place was the same one, or she the same woman who had come back to it after the experiences of the evening. A white letter on the table caught her eye; it had come by hand and not by post. "Jim!" she cried. "A letter from Jim!" and clutched it in her left hand, while with the right she tremblingly held the match to a candle. Then she tore open the envelope.

"We are on our way to England, and I stopped at Alassio, in order to see you. Am going on by the next train, 10.20 to-night. Miss Bennett said you had left her to go back to your place, but there seems to be some mistake. I will get food, and return at a little before nine, and walk as far as the church and back. If you get this, will you let me see you, if only for a minute?"

"And I might have missed you!" she cried. "Oh, to think I shall see you again!" She read his letter a second time, and kissed it; then joyfully extinguished the light and went down the dark stairs, out of the

house, and swiftly along the street, feeling like a swallow flying south. Someone was waiting by the church. She hesitated, then a little cry escaped her.

"Oh, Jim dear—oh, Jim! I thought I should never, never see you again. I can't bear it—I can't bear it, indeed. The happiness is too great"—and she burst into tears.

"Why, Kathy—my dear Kathy." He put his arms round her, and looked down at her face, though in the darkness he could hardly see it. "Is it as bad as that, my dear? I hoped that it was better with you."

"It is only the happiness," she whispered; "I can bear the other calmly. Tell me why you have come?"

"I couldn't make myself go without seeing you once more"—

"I thought"—she went on, with a great sigh of thankfulness—"I thought we should never meet again. Nothing in the world will matter now."

"My poor little girl—look here—let us come and sit on the beach. I saw a seat there. The population of Laigueglia appears to be dead and buried."

"Oh, to think that we are together again, and by the Mediterranean;" her voice was trembling with joy. "It is like a wonderful dream." And she clung to his arm as they went towards the sea. "Now, tell me," she said, when they had found the seat—"tell me, have you been angry—what did you think—why didn't you send me a single word in the Mummy's letter?"

"Angry, my child? I have thought nothing except that I love you, and for that reason had better not write. You went away so early that morning from Generoso. I had no idea I should not see you again"—

"I was afraid."

"You said you were going next morning, and for fear of missing you I got up at seven, but you had been gone two hours. Thought I should catch you up at Mendresio, but by the time I had got down on foot—there wasn't a mule to be had—you had been a couple of hours in the train. I swore considerably, and went back again."

"I am so glad you did try to catch me up," she said; "it shows— Tell me why you did not send me just a message in the Mummy's letter."

"I was ill, dear,—great bore,—that confounded fever got hold of me again, but she didn't want to worry you, and so said nothing about it. She didn't tell me till afterwards that she had written. I say, what a wonderful place this is! I wish we could stay in it for ever, you and I." He looked round for a moment as a breath from the orange trees was wafted to him. To the left was the still village; to the right the Corniche road going on to Andora; in front the sands and the sea; a little way ahead, at each end of the bay, were the dark rocks, and on the left the island of Gallinara; in the background were the mountains, and over everything was the strange spell of night and silence. "If we could have a century of it, it would be all right."

"Ah, if we could!" she echoed eagerly. "But tell me about the Mummy—where is she?"

"At present she is waiting for me at Ventimiglia. We came from Genoa to-day, get to England the day after to-morrow. I told her I must see you again; I saw that the train actually stopped at the station, and

I couldn't pass it. She was pretty angry, but never mind. I got out at Alassio, and go on from there by the next train, 10.20, which is the mail through to Marseilles. We should have had to wait for it in any case, and I wait here with you, instead of there with her."

"She wouldn't come and see me too?" He shook his head. "And she won't forgive me for not telling her from the first?"

"Yes, my sweet, she forgives you, but for all her sweetness the Mummy is a stern moralist. She wants you to write to your uncle, or else to go to England—to her house—as soon as I am gone, and to let her write to your husband and see what can be done."

"And do you wish it too?"

"I can't wish it," he said gently; "but something ought to be done."

"He thinks that I am dead;" and she explained briefly the mistake about her box and the meeting with the Oswells. "Why should he ever know that I am alive? Jim, I have been sorry that I told you," she said in a hushed voice. "You might have married me and taken me to India, and nobody would have known. He would have been thankful that I was dead, and we should have been happy all our lives. It would have done no one any harm. I couldn't have done it, because I couldn't have borne to deceive you. But it would have done no harm?"

"It doesn't do to fly in the face of the law; it has a way of avenging itself."

"Yes, I know. Mr. Oswell said it too; but would it have been wrong in itself? Would it be wrong

if you took me away now, and he never knew that I was alive, and we were faithful to each other all our lives?"

"It wouldn't do, dear;" and he shook his head. "We have got to do the best we can, and to put the best we know into the world."

"But it wouldn't do anyone any harm," she pleaded.

"That is a thing we can never insure. Look here, Kathy," he said, taking her hands and resting his face on her hair, for she had taken off her hat. "Suppose we did as you say, and called each other husband and wife in India."

"I always feel as if I were married to you," she whispered.

"Do you, my sweet? Tell me why."

"Because we loved each other, and told each other so, up at Generoso. And you kissed me," she whispered, lower still, but with a courage the darkness gave her, "and I knew that you cared for me, and my heart was full of love for you. Nothing can undo it, nothing as long as I live, or try as much as I will: it is like a marriage tie."

"And it shall be like one to me," he said tenderly. "But we will try to do the right thing for all that, and not the wrong one. Suppose, as I say, my darling, that we did live as man and wife in India, and he found it out. There would be a divorce."

"But that would set me free."

"At a terrible price. We might have children some day, you and I; we should wish for them if we were natural people. Would you like them to grow up and find out our disgrace? It is no good, my sweet; no-

thing will make a wrong thing right, and no amount of repenting will ever undo it. We should have to turn the world backwards to blot it out, even though we were forgiven a dozen times over."

"I should not care whether I were forgiven or not," she said, between her teeth.

"But I should, my darling, not on my own account, but on yours. I am not going to make the woman I love afraid to look other people in the face. The fact that we love each other ought to make us strong enough to do the right thing, not weak enough to do the wrong one. At the same time," and he ground his teeth, "I can't stand your being with him again, though, of course, it would be better for you in some ways."

"No, Jim, that can never be," she said in a low determined voice.

"Then you must stand out for a separation. The Mummy will do that for you; and perhaps you could go and live with her. I shall be out of the way; that will be better, for he might raise some scandal. Does she see that I am only trying to think of what is best for her?" he asked gently.

"Yes, Jim, I know;" and, stooping, she tried to kiss his hands. "Yes, let me," she said, as he tried to draw them away. "Let me; I am not good enough for you to kiss my face, for I have been trying to make you do wrong."

"No, she hasn't," he said passionately. "She has only been proving that she loves me—and I love her, my dear, my sweet, I love her! And since she can't

be my wife, I will promise her never to marry anyone else as long as I live."

"But I should like you to marry and be happy, Jim," she said, with a sigh. "When you say that you love me, it makes me feel as if I could do anything in the world." She took his hands and put them together and rested her forehead down upon them. "Anything in the world," she repeated, after a long minute's silence, "no matter how difficult it is. It gives me strength, and I will prove it—I will indeed. Give me a little time just to gather myself together, and you shall see. Don't ask me—I can't tell you, but it shall be done—not yet, but in a little time. When do you start for India?"

"On the 26th of January."

"Till then," she said, with a gasp, "let me stay here and think of you and love you and grow strong—to do that which is most difficult. Hark! the clocks are striking. Those are the Alassio clocks; we hear them all this way when the wind is in the right quarter. What time does your train go, Jim? Ten-twenty? That was half half-past nine," she went on excitedly. "You must go, dearest, you must go, and perhaps it is better. Let me walk back with you to Alassio; the late train doesn't stop here. Let us have this one last walk together."

"No. You would have to come back alone and in the dark. I shall scurry along quickly enough by myself. We will have five minutes more, my sweet, and then good-bye."

"Will you write to me?" she asked eagerly.

He considered for a moment. "I will send you one

little letter when I arrive in England. That can't matter, and then let us be silent. I shall hear of you from George and Alice, as well as from the Mummy, for they are coming back. Uncle Horace is dead, and they are returning for good, to set up as respectable landowners."

"And you will be alone in India?"

"I shall think of you day and night," he said almost to himself.

"Oh, I hate right and wrong!" she cried vehemently. "And I can't bear it—I can't!—oh, forgive me!" she said, recovering. "It was just that moment, only just that one moment, that my courage seemed to vanish. And you must go, dear, it is time—you must go."

"All things have to be paid for," he said ruefully. "Thank Heaven we have had this one hour! Is the sorrow of saying good-bye too big a price for having met and loved each other?"

"No; and, Jim," she said solemnly, "I made our love a thank-offering at Generoso when I stood up and told you and the Mummy—it was my burnt sacrifice. I will make it another. I can't tell you to-night how or when it will be, but I will do it. Come, we must hurry." Then slowly they walked back to the village, and lingered again.

"It is time to go," he said reluctantly.

"Yes, it is time," she echoed, and they looked at each other as though they might never meet again.

"You will go past Laigueglia in the train," she said. "I will listen for it by the open window, and shall see it as it goes by between me and the sea."

"I shan't know which is your window."

"Yes, you shall," she exclaimed. "For I will light a candle and hold it up, and you will see it in the darkness, and know when you are passing me."

"That is splendid, my darling. By Jove! I have a box of lights in my pocket; I will light one as an answer. You will see it plainly. What! is this the place already?"

"Yes, Jim, already," she answered wofully.

A quarter-past ten.

She was standing by the open window counting the minutes: five more, and he would start from Alassio. "I will do it," she was saying to herself. "Oh, my dear, my dear, what does the rest matter, now that I have had that one hour with you, have seen your face and heard your voice and felt your kisses? I could walk to the stake and be burned and not feel it while this joy is upon me. It helps me to know how they bore things in the old days for love of Christ." She threw herself down on her knees and rocked to and fro with excitement. Then suddenly she started, for in the distance there was a sound. "Hark! it is coming—the train has started—he will be here directly!" With feverish haste she rose to her feet, lighted the candle, and shading it with her hands, stood with it by the open window, looking out into the darkness. Nearer and nearer it rumbled—nearer—quicker—it was passing. She waved the flickering candle, and suddenly there was a little flash from one of the windows of the dark train. A cry escaped her: "Oh, my dearest!" she exclaimed. "Perhaps I shall never see you again; it may be all over for ever and ever; but I will do even that for you—even that." And the light fell into darkness.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE weeks dragged by. Every day lagged, every hour drew itself out to the uttermost, and yet each one as it passed left regret and fright wrapped closer and closer round Katherine's heart. For the excitement had gone, and she felt as if she were living her last days of life: in three weeks the end of many things would come, and she knew perfectly what that end would be. Sometimes the old longing beset her to journey on and see the rest of the world. "My dear beautiful world," she said to herself, as she walked up the little red road towards the spot where King Otho's daughter had once lived in a cottage and found happiness, "I wish I could go on—could tramp on through you for ever, seeing all your seas, looking up at your mountains, and staying to rest a little among the people who belong to you. I am strong and well and young, and don't want to die; but when I do, I am glad to think that I shall be put into the earth and grow into it, till I become just a little part of the world itself."

The New Year dawned, Miss Bennett was dying, painlessly, but surely. Her sister had arrived, a gaunt, cheerful woman, evidently quite reconciled to her sister's going, and hoping not to be detained too long away from her husband and children.

"Poor Sarah was a woman who always grumbled,"

she explained to Katherine on the last afternoon of Miss Bennett's life. "She was never satisfied with things, and I don't wonder; she found them pretty hard, poor thing. Father wasn't fond of her as a child, and he was harsh to all his children. He always seemed to grudge them the joys and expectations of youth, and to think that he ought to show his supremacy by making home unbearable when he was in it. We used to scuttle out of sight when we heard his latch-key put into the door, and were as still as mice in our hiding-places. If he went away, we celebrated it with rejoicings. When we went to school, I think he regretted it if our lessons were made pleasant and easy. He thought we ought to find them dull and hard, and work at them unceasingly. He was fond of us in his way perhaps, but if we showed signs of thinking there was such a thing as happiness in the world, save that dealt out by our elders at their discretion, he was displeased. It was the fashion to bring up children harshly. It had its effect on Sarah."

"And your mother?"

"She had no power, and she died when Sarah was eighteen. We were not well off, and my father hurried us all out to get a living. He thought it a duty, and that it would be good for us to find the world hard while we were young. Sarah taught French and music in a school for years, and saved a little money, and in the holidays went to stay with some rich cousins in Staffordshire. They snubbed or patronised her, and made her help them with their accomplishments for nothing. Then the worst thing of all happened to her:

she fell in love with a man who has been the ruin of her life, though she hasn't seen him for years and years now."

"How was he the ruin of her life?" Katherine and Mrs. Wells were walking up and down the garden of the *pension*, while Miss Crockett watched a few minutes beside the invalid.

"He thought she was as well off as her relations, so he made love to her, and she liked him. Afterwards, when he found she had no money, he deserted her. She has never ceased to care for him, though she knows perfectly what he is—it is knowing that has made her still more hard and dissatisfied. She wrote and asked him to come out here and say good-bye to her—for he knows well enough that she cares for him still."

"And he refused?"

"He was too busy, he said; and it would do her no good. She might have got over her love for him, if her childhood had been different. It was grounded into her that the world was hard and selfish, and that the only safe attitude towards it was one of fight and defiance. If ever you marry"—

"Yes?"

"—and have children, let them be happy, Miss Kerr. Happiness is far better than money for them. Money may be spent and forgotten, but happiness will be remembered. I snatch at every innocent joy I can for mine, and love them, and tell them so, and let them see that they are a happiness to me. It is succeeding better than our bringing-up did. They think the world is a delightful place, in which everyone is kind and

good, and in their turn they try their little bests to be kind and good too—it comes natural to them.”

“I am glad you told me about Miss Bennett. I can understand her now.”

“It is a common little history enough,” Mrs. Wells said. “A thousand women could repeat it, though it is wearing itself out, and will, as the old ideas vanish. But let us go in; Miss Crockett said she would put a white handkerchief at the window when Sarah woke, and I saw her pin it to the curtain.”

Miss Bennett was awake and sensible. Her eyes wandered restlessly round the room. “I don’t want you, Grace,” she said to her sister; “I want to talk to Miss Kerr. You had better go and get her some tea. I have been thinking about those notes,” she said, when they were alone—“the hundred pounds that came to Generoso. Did you send it to me? You wanted to give me some money a few days before. I thought, perhaps”—She closed her eyes for a moment, unable to go on. “Did you?” she asked, clutching feebly at the frill of the square white pillow under her head.

“No, indeed, I didn’t,” Katherine answered, and wondered whether she might tell her the truth. But while she hesitated, a smile that was almost happy broke over Miss Bennett’s face.

“I am glad of that,” she said; “and Grace knows nothing about it either. I think”—and she looked up with a strange expression in her eyes—“that it was sent me by someone I used to like very much. I am glad he sent it,” she whispered; “it shows that he thought of me, and wanted me to be comfortable at the last. I

wish you knew him, then you could give him the message. Grace never liked him, and perhaps she would not give it."

"Give him what message?" Katherine asked. "And tell me how?"

"It is only that I quite understood. He had to be prudent—a man must be prudent, you know. You are a good girl, and I hope you will marry young Alford." She shut her eyes for a moment, and then a smile broke over her face. "I am glad I know," she said in a satisfied voice, "that he sent me his money—he has given me everything I have had for the last two months—he must have felt that I belonged to him."

And so she dreamed on into eternity.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE little letter came from Jim on his arrival in England: only a few words, but they were satisfying. Then a fortnight went by, nearly three weeks, and Katherine sat in her little room at Laigueglia, writing letters. She felt as if she would never get through them, and stopped many times to gather courage: every word seemed to be torn out of her heart and life. The first one was to Mrs. Alford.

“Jim told me that you were very angry,” it ran, “and I could tell that it was so from the letter you sent me before he came. But you said in that letter, and he repeated it, that you wished me to go to you if I did what you and he considered to be right. And this I am going to do, dear Mummy. I know Jim starts on the twenty-sixth, a week to-morrow, and on that day I shall leave Laigueglia and journey slowly towards England,—slowly, for my feet will have to be dragged one after the other, even though they are taking me to you at Chilworth. I will write to my uncle by this post, as you wished, telling him everything that I have done, and giving him your address, and saying that he will find me there. I will write to Mr. Belcher too, saying that I am coming, and that Uncle Robert will know my whereabouts. Now, will you forgive me

everything, dearest Mummy? Though I fear I do not do it so much for love of what is right, as for love of Jim and you. But I am glad to do what is right—I want to do it, and yet I long after the other, and it seems to me that it would have been better, for we should have been so happy. But I would give thankfully any happiness of mine to you or Jim, and somehow out of my love for you both I am giving you this deed.

“I shall be with you on Monday night, dear Mummy, and will tell Uncle Robert so. Perhaps he will not come to me till Tuesday, and then I shall have that little time alone with you, and you will make me strong to carry out all this; and I will love you and try to comfort you a little because Jim will be with you no longer. Let me send my love to him; I do not think that Heaven itself could grudge it him. Tell him that I shall start on my journey towards you on that same day—Friday, the 26th—that he will start on his away from you—Your loving

“KATHERINE.”

Then there came the long explanatory letter to her Uncle Robert, and one to Mrs. Oswell, telling her all that she had done, and begging that she might find a line awaiting her when she arrived at Chilworth. And then she wrote a little note to Susan, apologising for any trouble she had caused her, and hoping that some day they might meet again. Last of all, there was the letter to her husband. It was more difficult than any other to write:—

“... You never cared for me,” she said, “but I do not wonder, for I was so much younger than you, and knew so little; I always felt in your way—and I was. But I was not fair to you when I took my fate altogether into my own hands, and I beg you to forgive me and to let me live quietly away from you, so that you do not remember anything about me to vex you. It is no use pretending that I care for you or could be happy with you, for that would be untrue; but I will leave everything in Uncle Robert’s hands; he will tell you where I am, and decide what is best to be done.”

She went out while her strength lasted and posted her letters, feeling as if they held her death-sentence, and she were going to follow them to the place of execution. She walked back along the sands and picked up a Venus’s slipper, looked at it wonderingly, and threw it into the sea. She remembered the orange garden at the hotel, and went back towards it, and then she climbed a mountain pathway for half a mile and looked round at the sea and the bay and the island, and the mountain chain right and left of her: soon she would have seen them all for the last time. She gathered some Banksia roses, and went up higher. There was a little ruined chapel dedicated to the Virgin. She sat down and leaned her head against its wall. “She was a woman and suffered, and it comforts me to sit here,” she said to herself. “If only I could understand things better! Why should so many women have prayed and wept out their hearts to the Virgin if she cannot hear or help them; and if she can, why is the

knowledge of it denied to so many others? It seems sometimes as if we were all hopelessly blind and deaf, or as if there were some strange senses in us tied down and unable to explain the things that are or are not. It isn't to be wondered at if most of us go astray. If I wanted to make myself more miserable, it would be easy enough to sit and think that love and pain and death and the wide world's beauty are the only things that we know to really exist."

Friday morning—the 26th—dawned.

She was going to leave Laigueglia by the ten o'clock train. Jim would not leave Chilworth till the afternoon, for she remembered hearing him say that the Indian mail started late. She had never travelled very far alone by land before, but what did it matter? Suppose she were killed, it would not be worse than going back to Mr. Belcher. She had miscalculated the time the journey would take when she wrote her letters. She might have stayed at Laigueglia till Saturday night or Sunday morning, and yet been in time to get to Mrs. Alford's by Monday night; but having said that she would start on Friday, she could not bring herself to depart from a word that she had written. So she stood packed and ready at the little station. The Italian woman with whom she had lodged came to see her off, and kissed her, and gave her a branch of oranges as a parting gift, and Katherine thought her heart would break when she heard her last "Addio, signorina!" as the train moved off. She saw her own little window from the train—the window to which she had held up the light as Jim went by with an answering flash. But she tried to keep down all thoughts of him and of that

night by the sea. It must be forgotten; everything must be forgotten, except that for his sake—his sake, and not the Mummy's, as her heart knew well—she was going to do this saddest, hardest thing of all.

The train went on in the sunshine by the mountains and the landscape yellow with oranges on the one side, and the blue sea on the other. She looked from side to side wonderingly; it seemed as if every moment the earth grew more beautiful, but that she was going away from it. Past all the little villages with the happy peasants in them, and the shrines, and the churches, and the little town with the prison in the shape of a cross; past San Remo with its big hotels and air of fashion; past Bordighera with its palm trees, and on to Ventimiglia; then, like a dream-woman, she got out to change over to the French side, wondering if it could be really true that she was awake, taking this journey alone, and in order to give herself up to Mr. Belcher.

All manner of wild ideas came into her head as she scurried along. She thought of Eltham Palace and the moat, and the crane standing on one leg. Perhaps it remembered Anne Boleyn, and knew how she felt on her way to Tower Hill. She thought of Alice Alford's joke about Anne dancing with her head in her pocket in the palace of Eltham. There was a gallery at one end in which the musicians had sat, never dreaming that perhaps some day their ghosts would come back and sit there playing music that had no sound in it, to an empty hall turned into a barn. Katherine felt as if she were going through life with her head in her pocket. Who knows? She might dance or laugh—what did it matter? All the time she would be a dead woman.

And then she laughed out bitterly, and broke down and cried, and told herself for the thousandth time that nothing would matter more, her life had come to an end, and she was going back to Mr. Belcher for an eternity. She slept at Marseilles, a long, dreamless sleep, a stranger in a strange land and a big hotel, and wondered in the morning what to do next, for she had too much time on her hands. It would have been far better to rush the journey through. Finally, she decided to stay all day at Marseilles; but she had no heart to walk about. She was a prisoner going back to gaol, and had no business to behave like a free woman.

So Saturday passed. Jim was in the train; she was not sure of his route, but she imagined that he must be somewhere in the middle of France. It was something to be in the same land with him. "Good-bye," she said to herself; "I am doing this for you, and you know it by this time. Good-bye." She left Marseilles that night, and travelled through to Paris, and stayed another long day in an hotel, seeing nothing of the city to which she had come. What a strange thing it was to be there and not to move a step outward! But she was a prisoner, she told herself again, and had no more right than she had heart to go a-pleasuring. She meant to start at night again—it seemed easier to travel in the dark, for then she could not see the distance lessening between her and her doom. But on the way to Calais she shook off her depression, and felt her courage come back. After all, Mr. Belcher was certain to consent to a separation. Had he not told her that he liked somebody else better? Uncle Robert would

manage things, and would not be so cruel as to let her go back to jeers and blows; and now that there was probably no prospect of any money, Mr. Belcher would not desire it.

She reached Charing Cross in the early morning, and still her courage held by her. After all, she was going to the Mummy that day, to see Jim's home, to hear how he had set forth, and whether he had left a message for her: perhaps he had written her another word. But there was one more day to get through first. She felt shy of going to Chilworth before the evening; the Mummy would not expect her, and might have other visitors. Then suddenly the idea struck her that she would go to Eltham; the crane was gone long years ago; but there was the palace and the moat, and the way through the churchyard and across the cornfield to the woods that led to Shooters' Hill.

So she walked through the quaint old place that day and stood before the palace, and saw the moat, and the little bridge, and the gnarled trees, that looked as if centuries had passed since they were saplings. Then she went on to the church; and suddenly the bells rang out a peal. Two people were being married; she wondered if they loved each other, and whether they thought it all a joke, and marriage a pastime that did not need much thinking about before they entered upon it; and, above all, if they were taking each other of their own free will, or because they had been talked and persuaded into it. She went across the cornfields, brown and bare in the winter sunshine, and over the stile to the woods. A wooden hoarding had been put up on one side of the pathway: someone had enclosed

half the ground. What did it matter? Perhaps she would never see it again. She trod the crisp leaves under foot, and looked up through the brown boughs and twigs at the winter sky. The hips were red and blackberry briars trailed on either side the pathway, with scarce a leaf upon them; but the holly-bushes looked green and sturdy. A thrush flew overhead, giving out a sweet, fresh note, and a little robin hopped along the ground as though it were a bird of lowlier degree. She sat down on a tree that had been felled, and spent a whole two hours thinking. Then a clock in the distance struck two. It was time to go. She was afraid to walk round by Severndroog Tower, for it was there that Mr. Belcher had found her on the evening that he told her they were to marry. She took the narrow path that led to the high road opposite The Bull, and walked slowly down Shooters' Hill till she came to the turning with the well at the corner. The White House was only a step beyond. A high fence, through which she could not see, half hid it from the roadway; but the strangers who had come to live there had children, for she heard their voices playing in the garden. She turned back and went swiftly past the post office and The Red Lion, till she came to the lane between the stuffed-bird shop and Ordnance Terrace—an old lady in a widow's cap, and a girl, stood by the window of the first house. She thought of them for a minute as she hurried round the corner. She almost ran past the cottages in the lane, and on to the common, and through the White Gate, safely to Woolwich station.

CHAPTER XXV.

It was more than an hour's journey from Charing Cross to Chilworth, and the twilight deepened into darkness as the train went through the pine woods of Surrey; but she was there at last, and stood in the darkness and cold, wondering what to do. She had a vague hope that there might be a message for her at the station, with some direction to the house, but there was none, and hardly a soul was to be seen, and no one took any notice of her. She gave up her ticket on the platform and hesitated. On the left, outside the gate,—the station was by a level crossing,—there was a narrow lane that appeared to lead into the country. On the other side of the line a road was visible, and a few straggling houses. "Is that Chilworth?" she asked the porter hurrying by with some luggage. He answered, "Yes, miss," and went on. The house must be that way, she thought, or, at anyrate, she would be able to inquire. She crossed the line and went out by the way. The village was evidently there; facing her, some fifty yards off, was a little country inn; to the right, parallel with the railway line, was a road that even in the darkness looked picturesque, with over-reaching trees and vegetation on either side. A woman came along it. Katherine stopped her and inquired.

"I'm not sure, miss," she answered; "I think it's the

house a little farther back on this road. I don't live about here, but I think that is it. I passed it just now." So Katherine walked on. She could only see the trees and underwood on one side, and a low, bare blackberry hedge that bounded them. On the right was a long, unpainted hand-rail, and behind it a stream stretched and widened out for some way parallel to the road and the railway line; separating it from the latter was a bank and hedge. Over the stream willows hung and shadows stayed, and the water gleamed darkly through them. A little farther, and then on the right there was a meadow behind the hand-rail,—for the stream and the railway line had wound into the middle distance,—and on the left was a trim fence and a staring white gate. She stopped before she came to the gate—for she could see its whiteness plainly—just to gain time. A clump of poplars waved to and fro in the darkness, as though they were softly rocking the world to sleep. And the seas were rocking it too, she thought, even the tideless Mediterranean beside Alassio and Laigueglia and the seat where she and Jim had had their talk. She thought of the white church standing out in the darkness there, and of the great crack in it that the earthquake had made. To all things tragedy was possible, she told herself, and if it had come to her, why, it was just to one little human life, of which few could take account. But the church would stand perhaps through the centuries, and the generations of worshippers who came to kneel and pray and be comforted would know that its beauty was marred before them all, and in the sight of heaven.

Then, feeling that her strength had gathered, in

the minutes while she stayed to dream, she went up to the white gate. Written in black letters on it was "The Poplars," so to her dismay it was not Mrs. Alford's—to her dismay, for she was very tired and her courage was ebbing. She felt like a fugitive in a dream, but a fugitive who, from sheer tiredness, could not keep her thoughts even with her pursuers. She hesitated and wondered. A clock in the distance struck six; it seemed a lonely sound as it came to the lonely woman on the road. Then suddenly she felt afraid. To her worn senses there lay in the distance some strange, indefinite future: and it was terrible. She turned and hurried back to the village. A man stood under the lamp and beside the stable-yard of the little inn.

"Mrs. Alford's? why, yes, miss," he said. "You have come the wrong way. You must cross the line and go up the lane on the other side for half a mile. Then you'll come to Blackheath." The name sounded almost home-like; it reminded her of the Blackheath near Shooters' Hill. "Turn off sharp to the left and walk on till you come to it. You'll find 'Rook's Nest' put up on the gate."

So she groped her way across the line again, better for the sound of the man's cheery voice, and walked up the lane she had seen when she arrived. There were dark hedges on either side, it was lonely and still, but some little stars came out in the sky as if to bear her company. At the end of half a mile the road ascended, and she could see that there was an open space stretching right and left, while facing her was a far-off view half-hidden in the night. She turned off

sharply to the left, as the man had told her. She was certain of her route now, and though she was footsore with the long day's tramp, a sense of hurry and scare carried her along. Another hundred yards, then she stopped suddenly by a gate. It led to a house with fir trees growing thick beside it. She pushed open the gate and found her way to the door.

The bell rang loudly, as though the house inside were hollow. She could hardly keep her trembling self upright while she heard someone within coming to answer it. A tall woman of five-and-forty stood and looked at her. By the dim light of the hall Katherine could see that she was pale and haggard.

"Is this Mrs. Alford's?" she asked in a voice she tried to make steady.

"Yes," said the woman slowly. "You are the lady from Italy, I suppose? I am to let you in—we expected you—the mistress will see you for a minute. Will you come to the dining-room?" She led the way into a dark, cold room, putting a light she carried from the hall down on the table. Then she shut the door and went towards Katherine and looked at her again. "The mistress said I was to tell you first, ma'am, and before you went to her," she said, with infinite pity in her voice. "You needn't mind my telling you instead of her, for I have been with them more or less these five-and-twenty years, and knew Mr. Jim since he was a little boy."

"Yes?" said Katherine, not dreaming of what was to come.

"And the mistress told me how fond you were of him, and what a blow it would be"—

"Yes—but what?" she asked, a dread of something terrible taking hold of her. "Has anything happened?"

"Yes," said the woman, nodding and speaking in a voice that was almost a sob, "the very worst that could be has happened. Mr. Jim was to start on Friday"—

"I know."

"And on Thursday night he died, dear heart, and this day he was buried."

"Oh, my God!" Katherine cried, and fell forward. But the woman caught her and almost carried her to the leather sofa behind them, and sat down beside her, and took off her hat and little travelling cloak, and smoothed the hair from her forehead. "Oh, no, no!" she said presently; "it can't be—it can't be!"

"Ah, poor dear, the mistress said you loved him," the woman answered, "and what it would be to you. It was the fever that took him, on the top of a chill that he got just three days before, and he seemed to have no strength to fight it off, though he had always been a strong man, and was, to look at, till the last."

Then a quarter of an hour went by, with no sound in it save the ticking of a clock.

"Did you say that she would see me?" Katherine asked at last.

"Yes, ma'am, she will see you," the woman answered gently, with the helpful manner that only belongs to an old servant; "but you mustn't stay with her many minutes, for she has gone through a terrible day, and the doctor says she is better alone. But you shall see her, and then you must come away with me,

and I'll give you food and put you to rest, and you shall cry your heart out, dear, for tears will help you most." Something in the woman's manner told Katherine that she knew the history of her coming.

"Has she been all alone?"

"Yes all alone, except for those who were not near to her; but to-morrow Mr. George and his wife are coming from India. They missed the telegram, or would have been here to-day. They'll take care of her, poor dear."

George and Alice? Oh yes, she remembered how that Jim had said they were coming home for good. They had inherited Uncle Horace's property.

"May I go to her?" she asked, still dazed and unable even to sorrow.

"Yes, dear," the woman said in her sweet, compassionate voice, "I'll take you to her. There's a letter waiting for you. I'll get it while you are with her."

"Is it from Jim?" she asked, starting.

"No, it is one that came to-day."

Mrs. Alford was sitting in her own room in a high-backed easy-chair, over a deadened fire. She turned her head, but made no other sign till Katherine, kneeling down in front of her, kissed her dress. Then she lifted her hands and put them round the girl's shoulders and folded her to her heart for a moment.

"He saw your letter," she said, "and told me to take care of you, dear. But I can't speak of it to-night, or think of anyone but him."

"Oh, Mummy, dear Mummy!" came from Katherine's lips.

"You shall belong to me," the old lady said again; "but you must leave me alone now. I am trying to think that it was a blessing to have had him at all, but it is hard to feel anything except that he has gone. You must go to Elizabeth." Then Katherine kissed her dress again, and the thin hands that rested on it, and went reverently from the room.

Elizabeth was waiting outside; she had a letter in her hand and a lighted candle. "Perhaps you would like to read it," she said, and held up the light as they stood on the staircase. It was from Mrs. Oswell.

"My dear," it said, "I have seen your aunt, and she has confided to me that your uncle has given Mr. Belcher your address—from a sense of duty, I suppose. Duty has many cruel things to answer for in this world. I let you know at once, in case he should be down upon you, but remember Fred and I will stand by you hard and fast."

Katherine read it twice, but even then she was so dazed she could hardly take it in; and when she did, it seemed so trifling a calamity she could not realise it. She looked up at Elizabeth bewildered. "Which was his room?" she asked in a whisper.

"That one just a few steps down," the woman answered; "there—above the hall. You had better not see it to-night, dearie."

"Yes, let me," she pleaded. Without a word Elizabeth led the way and opened the door. Stillness and blackness stared them in the face. There was a bookcase on one side of the fireplace, and on the other were two portmanteaux and a tin case piled one on the other. Between the windows and the fireplace was a

bedstead, but only a mattress covered with a sheet was on it, and at the head a pillow. Between the bed and the windows a space seemed to have been cleared; it looked as though something had stood there that had been carried out.

"Did he die there?" she asked, looking towards the bed.

"Yes," nodded Elizabeth; "with his head on that pillow. It may be you would like to be alone a few minutes;" and, putting the light on a chest of drawers, she went softly from the room. Then Katherine went up to the bed and knelt down, took the pillow and hid her face in it.

Suddenly there was a sharp ringing of the front door bell. She heard footsteps go towards it, and buried her face deeper into the pillow, and pulled it round her head, and kissed it with the passion that means despair. Then the door was opened, and her own name and a voice she knew well enough fell upon her ear. Someone entered, and the street door was closed.

Mr. Belcher had found her.

CHAPTER XXVI.

SHE got up, took the candlestick from the drawers, and, shutting the door after her, went slowly downstairs.

Mr. Belcher stood in the hall watching her descend. He saw her face plainly. It was set and grave, and older than when he had seen her last. But it was a girl's face still, and not a woman's. She set the candle down and faced him, and he saw the scared look in her eyes and noticed her dazed manner.

"How do you do?" he said, and came forward, but something prevented him from even putting out a hand. His voice was half amused and half sarcastic. How well she remembered it! "Had a pleasant journey."

"Did you get my letter?" she asked, trying to gather her senses together.

"Yes, thank you. You didn't give me your address, so Uncle Robert kindly supplied it. Enjoyed your continental trip? Capital idea, wasn't it?"

"Hush!" she said in a low voice. "Someone has died here. Would you mind speaking gently."

"Perhaps you will come into the dining-room, sir," Elizabeth said, with a little air of shockedness at Mr. Belcher's manner. They followed her in, and, when they were left together, stood looking at each other again for a moment. Then he spoke.

"I think you are better-looking. If you were a little more cheerful it would be an improvement, of course. Enjoyed yourself? Your departure was a little sudden, and so is your return."

"Why did you come?" she asked in a low voice. "I told you in my letter what I wished."

"Quite so; but you see there is what I wish to be considered as well. I thought you would be pleased to have my escort home."

"I can't go," she said slowly.

"I think you can," he answered. "Gibson will have supper waiting for us, and Dottel is at the station. We shall have quite a family meeting." He pulled out his watch. "Our train goes at 7.55, and it is twenty-five minutes past now. Perhaps you will get ready?" His manner implied that he thought the whole business an amusing joke.

"I can't."

"Nonsense. Come!"

"I can't. Let me stay here till you have seen Uncle Robert. He will arrange something."

"I think we can arrange it for ourselves. Is this your hat on the sofa?—let me help you."

She appeared to take in the meaning of his words slowly, to hold her senses together only by an effort.

"Oh, Edward, let me stay just a little while—till to-morrow! Someone has died here—let me stay, I beg you, with his mother—and comfort her."

"Well, no, I think not—I should like you to comfort me," he added scoffingly.

"She wants me—she is alone—to-morrow she will have her children"—

"That's lucky. She won't miss you long. Is this your cloak? Let me help you to put it on."

"I can't, I can't! Mrs. Alford is alone, and her son is dead"—

"Her son? Perhaps he was a particular friend of yours? If so, I can quite understand your reluctance; at the same time, as you happen to be my wife, I think I'll take charge of you to-night. Come, get ready," he said almost roughly.

"I can't—I can't tell Mrs. Alford."

"Not the least occasion. I'll explain to the obliging servant we saw just now that I have called for my wife;" he rang the bell as he spoke. "Put on your hat—here, let me help you." He held out her cloak, as she remembered his doing long ago at Shooters' Hill. "We have not much time. Oh!" as Elizabeth entered. "Will you tell your mistress that I have called for Mrs. Belcher and taken her home. Our condolences to her on her bereavement."

Elizabeth seemed to grasp the situation at a glance. "Won't you let the lady stay, sir? She is tired with her journey, and would be a comfort to the mistress."

"I must stay," Katherine said in despair.

"I think we had better not make a scene," he answered, with cool determination. "You are going, and it would be best to do so quietly."

Elizabeth looked at him with alarm.

"The mistress is just above, sir. Please don't disturb her," she said.

Katherine raised her head suddenly. "I had better go," she said; "it does not matter. Will you give her my dear love and say that I will write?" She put her

hand on Elizabeth's shoulder in token of good-bye, and Elizabeth quickly kissed the white fingers. Then reluctantly she opened the street door, and Mr. Belcher and Katherine vanished into the darkness.

"We might as well have started without that little conversation," he said; "it is a pity to waste time on useless arguments. Better take my arm. It is rather dark."

"No, thank you."

"Just as you like. We shall see which wins in the end, of course. Personally, I don't at all mind if you are disagreeable. I rather like a woman who can claw—she generally knows how to kiss as well. By the way, you had better give me a kiss after all this time. You are much handsomer since you took to going about the world on your own account, and I should like one."

"I think not," she said in such a weary voice that he was puzzled and silent for a few moments, as they went onwards down the lane.

"Oh, very well; it doesn't matter. You had much better be lively and agreeable. You can claw at intervals all the same."

She hardly heard him. She was thinking all the time: "If Jim had lived, I could have done it. I could have done anything; but he is gone for ever and ever, and I cannot. Even the Mummy will not want me. She will have Alice and George to-morrow."

She looked up at the sky. The stars had gone in. No one in the world knew, save the strange woman, Elizabeth, that she was walking along the dark lane with Mr. Belcher, and no one knowing would have cared. The world had its own concerns—no one took

heed of hers. Alice and George, the poor Mummy sitting by the deadening fire, Mr. and Mrs. Oswell, Uncle Robert who had betrayed her—they all had their own concerns. Only Jim had loved her best in the world, and he was gone for ever. The station lights were visible. She was going home to Montague Place.

"Excellent time," Mr. Belcher said in his cynical, cheerful voice, that seemed to cut like a knife. They crossed the line and waited. Mr. Belcher watched her with the old air of curious triumph. The porter came up to him.

"Perhaps you'll kindly see to your dog yourself, sir, when the train is up. He's rather more than we care for."

Mr. Belcher nodded, and explained to Katherine, "I left him here for fear of losing him in the dark; but I suppose they are afraid of him."

A moment later and the train came almost noiselessly into the station. Mr. Belcher handed her into a carriage near the engine.

"We'll keep it to ourselves," he said, "then we can have that kiss on the journey." He pulled out a key and locked her in. "I will return in a moment when I have seen to Dottel. You must excuse me," he raised his hat with mock politeness.

For a moment she sat still and dazed. Then suddenly she rose to her feet and looked out of window. Mr. Belcher, with his back turned, was hurrying towards the end of the train. There was no official near to let her out, the few passengers were farther back. She flew to the other side of the carriage and tried the

door. It was not locked. In a moment she had opened it, slipped down on to the line, and closed the door again—she could reach to fasten it. She darted ahead in the darkness, she was afraid to risk the lighted platform on the arrival side, for she divined in a second that she might be seen from the train. Past the hissing engine, across in front of it and on to the far end of the departure platform—it had a little slope at the end—and on again beside the line. Something gleamed in the darkness through the bare hedge on her left. She recognised it with a cry of joy. It made plain to her as a lightning flash the meaning of her walk that night. In a moment she was through the open railing, desperately parting the hedge with her hands. She forced her way through it, and stood for a moment on the bank that sloped downwards, looking at the dark water. Suddenly the train moved, slowly—slowly she heard it coming out of the station. It was overtaking her, she thought, and panic seized her. With a little cry of triumph—her triumph at last—and with outstretched hands, she threw herself forward.

She fell suffocating and blinded, but all things that had been in her life crowded swiftly round her. Far down—down—she saw the white church at Laigueglia, beside its shut door stood waiting the crane from Eltham Palace: and as the waters met above her head, it seemed as though her lover's arms had closed round her for ever.

The train went whizzing past, but she only heard it from eternity.

THE END.



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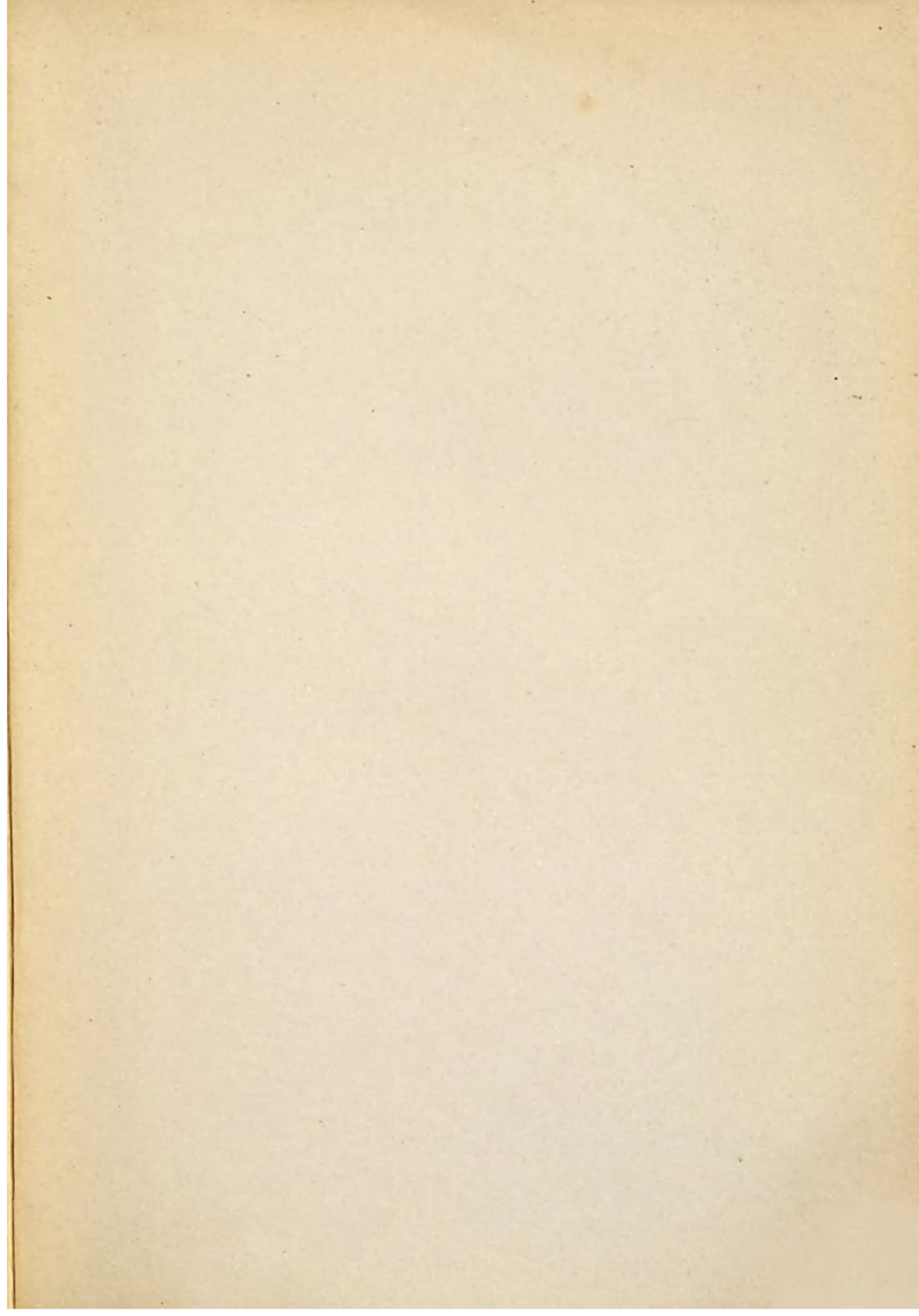
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